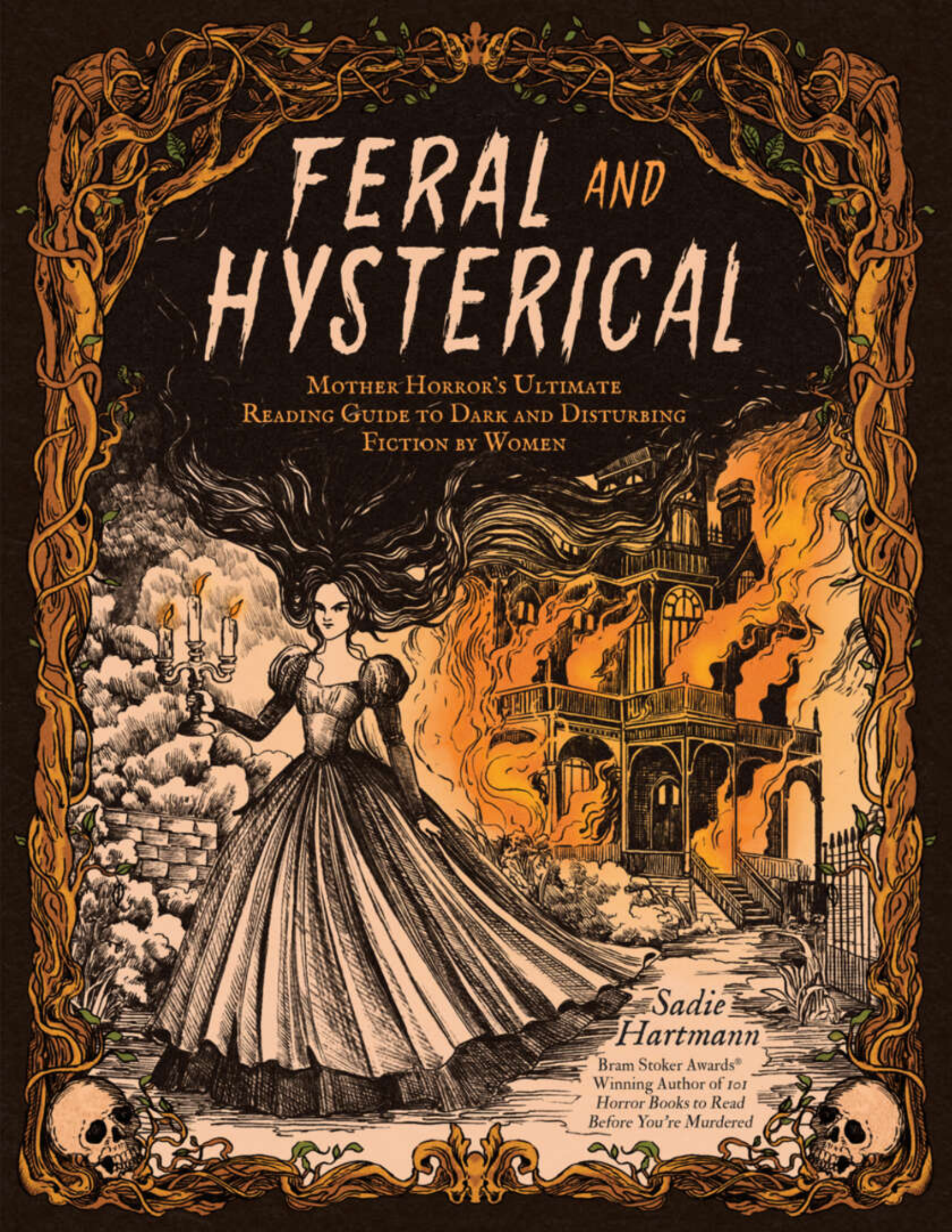
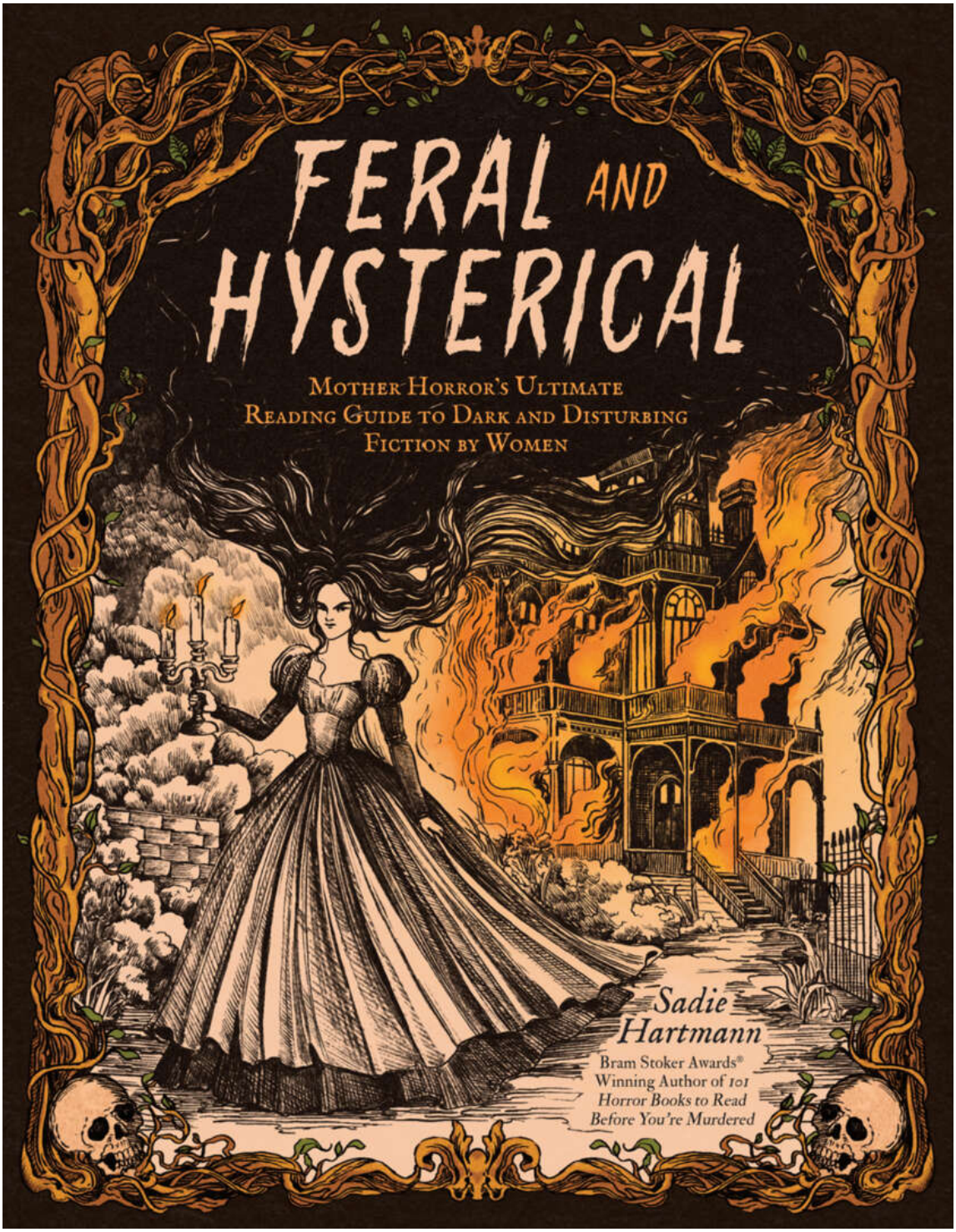
FERAL AND HYSTERICAL

Mother Horror's Ultimate Reading Guide to Dark and Disturbing Fiction by Women



Sadie Hartmann

Bram Stoker Awards® Winning Author of *101 Horror Books to Read Before You're Murdered*


FERAL AND HYSTERICAL
Mother Horror's Ultimate Reading Guide to Dark and Disturbing Fiction by Women
Sadie Hartmann
Bram Stoker Awards® Winning Author of 101 Horror Books to Read Before You're Murdered

FERAL AND HYSTERICAL

MOTHER HORROR'S ULTIMATE READING GUIDE TO DARK AND DISTURBING FICTION BY WOMEN

Sadie Hartmann

Bram Stoker Awards® Winning Author of *101 Horror Books to Read Before You're Murdered*

Begin Reading

Table of Contents

About the Authors

Copyright Page

Thank you for buying this
Page Street Publishing Co. ebook.

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

Sign Up

Or visit us online at
www.pagestreetpublishing.com

The author and publisher have provided this e-book to you for your personal use only. You may not make this e-book publicly available in any way. **Copyright infringement is against the law. If you believe the copy of this e-book you are reading infringes on the author's copyright, please notify the publisher at: http://us.macmillanusa.com/piracy**.

Dedicated to us, the global sisterhood & coven.
The “weaker,” “fairer,” “softer” sex.
Let them underestimate us. Our stories tell the truth.

Foreword by Ania Ahlborn

Chances are, if you're holding this book, you've found yourself wandering through a dark and endless wood. This is horror fiction's vast and often overwhelming landscape, and it can be a treacherous, terrifying place. What should you read? Where should you start? Scariest of all? So many still view horror as a male author's domain. We have a few timeless names to thank for that, if thanks can be laid at all. There is no denying that, once upon a time, men primarily shaped this genre, and so, many readers believe—*falsely*, mind you—that women simply cannot be scary. And if you could see through the page, see me now, you'd be watching an ever-so-sinister smile settle into the corners of my distinctly female mouth. Because, oh, we can be scary. Just you wait and see.

Horror. Men can write it, sure. Sometimes, they even do it well. But women? We scream our truths into the darkness, no matter how painful, how tragic. We cut open our veins and bleed out the words. And for the most part, many of us die that way. Unseen. Unread. Sometimes altogether avoided. We are, after all, as good as feral and most certainly hysterical. Just ask Sadie Hartmann. She's spent years collecting the dead within this genre's darkest woods. And often, she takes those books that have been avoided, those authors that have been overlooked, and she grinds them into a powder she uses to fill her pockets. She waits for the perfect moment. She leans in. With a fistful of dust, she blows a plume of smoky ash toward a doubter. And then she gives a little smile and whispers into their ear: *Read this next. You'll love it, I swear.*

Meeting Sadie what feels like eons ago, I could immediately tell there was something special about her, and I was right. Sadie is a soothsayer of this genre. She's downright magical, and she's been a

champion of women horror authors for as long as I've known her. She doesn't just lift them up; Sadie *insists* that their voices be heard, and she's not here to ask politely for space at the table, either—she's built an altar all for herself, decorated with tarot cards, a scrying mirror, and a stack of well-loved "spooky novels" two feet high. And her fiercely unwavering advocacy has done more for horror than most people realize. Sadie has thrust my weird books into the hands of countless new readers. And I can say without hesitation that she's done the same for so many unknown writers. The overlooked ones. The breathlessly brilliant ones. The fearless women that would have otherwise fallen by the wayside because another male author received a glowing review, another male was featured on a bestseller list, another male was placed upon that ever-so-coveted pedestal. Meanwhile, the female of the species sat waiting, feral and hysterical, dying in the woods. Until Sadie. Until her.

But Sadie is far more than merely a champion of female authors. She's a curator. A tastemaker. A reader's best resource. As her social media handle dictates, she is *Mother Horror*, not just in name but in spirit. If you've read any of *my* books, you know my penchant for terrible mothers. These are the kind of mothers who loom in darkened hallways, who whisper unsettling things from doorways cracked open just a little too wide; the kind of mothers you run from because they're the antithesis of comfort. They are what you're afraid of. But Sadie? She's the opposite of that. She's a rare gem in a genre full of twisted families, haunted houses, and the kind of mothers who make your skin crawl. She's the good witch. The matriarch we all pine for. *Mother Horror*. Warm. Nurturing. Someone we can trust.

And trust is a big deal in horror. In a scary story, trust is the first thing to fail. You trust the wrong person, the wrong house, the wrong version of reality, and before you know it, you're running for your life. But in a space where everything is designed to unsettle, Sadie offers something steady. For many of us, horror has always felt like home, even when home itself sometimes does not. But Sadie

makes home feel safer or, at the very least, well-curated with the *right* kind of nightmares. She knows what stories will unsettle you in the best possible way, which ones will make you think, and which ones will wrap around your ribs and stay there long after you've turned the last page. She understands that horror isn't just a genre. It's not niche. It's not cult. It's a reflection of our world, of a *woman's* world. A way to process our fears. Our histories and fractured homes. Our hopes. Our losses. Our very existence in a world dominated by patriarchy, misogyny, and violence.

And let's talk about how she understands women's horror not just in theme and structure but in a way that feels almost supernatural. She reads by *vibes*—a concept she explains beautifully in the pages ahead. It's a kind of attuned instinct, an ability to hear a book's hum and feel the energy it radiates. Some people might call that female intuition, but I'm convinced it's a special kind of magic. Sadie doesn't just read a book; she senses it. She understands the rage, the grief, and the defiance that takes the shape of vengeful spirits. How lucky we are to have her pass that sapience along to the rest of us. So be warned and be ready. You'll pick up a book she recommends and feel as though she knows *exactly* what you need. That's not an accident. That's Sadie, working her literary witchcraft.

The compendium you're holding is not just a brilliant list of female-centric recommendations but a carefully crafted, vibes-first, heart-led journey into the stories Sadie loves most. What you'll find among these pages will make you want to read more. It will encourage you to find new voices and it will push you to explore author backlists. It will introduce you to new favorites, to writers you won't believe you've never read before. But more than anything, it'll leave you hungry—for more stories, for more chills, for that delicious, creeping unease. Horror thrives on the edge of fear and fascination, and no one understands that better than Sadie. Somehow, she makes you feel safe while leading you straight into that dark and haunted wood.

So, take her hand and let her lead you down this twisted path. She'll take you someplace scary, but she has a lantern to lead you by. Be brave, dear reader, and follow her light. And when she pulls a fistful of dust out of her pocket, breathe in and breathe deep. Allow yourself to be intoxicated by the stories and the authors you never knew you so desperately needed.

Ania Ahlborn

March 2025

Raleigh, NC

We are the mothers, the sisters, the daughters, the aunts, the cousins, the nieces, the grandmothers of all the burned and drowned and hanged.

—*The Path of Thorns* by A. G. Slatter

Introduction

Women are overqualified to write fictional horror. Period.

Allow me to unpack that statement for any skeptics out there. First, let's agree on the textbook definitions of carefully chosen words so we're all on the same page. And before anyone jumps to any conclusions, the overqualification of women to write fictional horror does not, in any way, disqualify or minimize the abilities of men writing fictional horror. That is not the point I'm making. The hill I will die on is this:

Words have power.

Men have wielded this power to keep women under their thumb since the beginning of time. This reality is a living nightmare from which we will never wake, and it's the reason why we are overqualified to put this nightmare, this reality, into words on the page.

The definition of **horror** is

"… an intense feeling of fear, shock, or disgust."

The definition of **feral** is

"… in a wild state, especially after escape from captivity or domestication."

The definition of **hysterical** is

"… uncontrolled or unrestrained extreme emotion."

Women are the “feral” and “hysterical;” our bodies flailing against restraint—captive. Our voices unleashed into the void from scratched, raw throats—unheard. So, by the first light of the day, by candlelight or firelight, during any time free from expectation or duty, dark and disturbing stories are written by the very people defined by powerful words.

Women.

Patriarchal systems historically pathologized women’s emotions in a concerted effort to dismiss or minimize any challenge of authority. Any passionate response to subjugation was immediately brought into submission. If the woman furthered her attempts to express her dissatisfaction, she was threatened with a trip to an institution. Doctors (often men, of course) indulged in the practice of diagnosing “feral” women with hysteria—getting its meaning from the Greek word, *hystera*, meaning uterus. In a word, the erratic and uncontrollable behaviors exhibited by a woman are governed by her reproductive organs. She simply can’t help herself; it’s in her nature to be unwieldly and, therefore, in need of subduing.

Men can passionately and demonstrably express anger, aggression, or frustration as characteristics of strength and leadership. But when women behave in the exact same way, it is insufferable. This is how men justified their exclusive right to be in leadership roles; women are the weaker sex, prone to unstable emotional conditions—especially during monthly cycles.

Women with serious medical or psychological conditions were silenced.

Women who were victimized mentally, physically, or sexually were silenced.

Women advocating for their rights and the rights of all women were silenced.

Hysteria was not just a medical diagnosis used to keep women locked up in asylums or sedated or used in radical psychological experiments; it was a word used to kill women.

The Salem witch trials stand as a testament to the systematic hunt and murder of women who posed a threat to patriarchal systems in place.

No woman was safe.

I am speaking in the past tense as though history is in the past and modern society has come to its senses.

It hasn't. In fact, in all the ways women have advocated for rights, fought for independence, won our equality in organized movements of progress—all have been put back on the table to be taken away.

Nothing has changed. The accusations of "hysteria," "feral," and "unhinged" are applied disproportionately against marginalized women, especially women of color, trans women, and anyone outside the binary who has a connection to womanhood.

No woman is safe.

In a society designed to silence the voices of marginalized people, how are those voices heard?

Storytelling. Words have power. Horror and dark, disturbing fiction written by the people who have lived it day in and day out since the beginning of time.

Reading dark and disturbing fiction by women authors and authors from marginalized communities in the last two years has reshaped my worldview and helped me reprioritize my reading habits. Decentralizing mainstream narratives illuminates the diverse realities people face, providing a fuller understanding of horror. I feel more empathetic and aware. The unique voices in these works

challenge not only societal norms but also my own assumptions, inviting me to see the world through lenses I hadn't considered before.

This is the transformative power of storytelling.

What Is Vibes Reading?

"Vibes reading" is the practice of choosing books based on their specific emotional and thematic energy—the way a book speaks to the reader through its cover, synopsis, themes, tropes, and atmosphere. It's not about momentary or fleeting emotions, the way a mood reader might pick up a cozy book on a rainy day because they're in the mood for it only to find the moment has passed once the weather clears. No, vibes readers are attuned to something deeper, something primal and instinctual. It's about feeling the unique pulse, the hum, of a book and matching it to the rhythm of other books beating on the same wavelength.

A vibes reader doesn't simply ask, "Am I in the mood for this?" They ask, "Does this book *vibrate* on my frequency?" Think of it like a music playlist. The way we use music to suit our inner static to cut through the overbearing noise of the world. It's a magical process of creation and alchemy. It might be the quiet menace of a Gothic tale that echoes your inner melancholy or the crackling electricity of body horror that pairs so well with your workout. Whatever it is, the connection is magnetic and undeniable.

To read by vibes is to be open to the sensory and emotional signature a book carries. The gritty, distressed pages of *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, the fairy-tale vibrancy of *Starling House* by Alix E. Harrow, or the feral, untamed energy of *Maeve Fly* by CJ Leede—all of these hum with distinct vibrations. You feel them. You *know* them.

So how do you choose books as a vibes reader? You don't overthink it. Trust your instincts. Be drawn to the wavelength that feels right, even if it's inexplicable.

Mood: an internal, temporary, emotional state of mind.

Vibes: a distinctive, external vibration capable of being sensed.

(Okay, sorry. Those are the last textbook definitions I'm using in this book.)

Which leads me to my vision for this book: A guided tour through dark and disturbing fiction written by women grouped into reading lists by someone ultrasensitive to book vibrations—the way certain books harmonize … horror book playlists, if you will.

Moods are fickle, but vibes? Vibes are forever.

Readers' Advisory

Curating a good reading list is its own magical alchemy and reminds me of making mixtapes for my friends. There was careful curation and intentionality involved. Just like our favorite songs make up the soundtrack of our lives, our favorite books can and should represent significant seasons of reading. So many of us are mood readers, book trackers, list keepers, and vibe lovers that it makes sense for us to curate reading "playlists" that help us capture the perfect list of books for any situation—no matter how weirdly specific they are.

My signature style of recommending books has been honed and crafted into a bespoke version of Readers' Advisory that I have tailored to suit my sphere of influence.

Readers' Advisory is …

The understanding that readers know what they enjoy. They have been discovering books for themselves since they could read. I have learned (because I am the same way) they are less interested in opinions and are more passionate about finding books they feel will satisfy their interests. This doesn't mean my taste in books doesn't influence my recommendations—it does; I just don't prioritize myself in a discussion about books when the goal is to find the *right* book for the reader in front of me. My method of recommending books prioritizes the reader's interests above my own personal experience. The way I share my thoughts about a book intentionally minimizes ratings.

"Is this a good book or a bad book?"

I believe all books have their audiences, so dissuading readers from trying a book based on my personal preferences is too limiting.

How to Use This Book

Catch the vibes. Scan the Table of Contents and pick a list that gives you a glowing little spark in your chest. Read one of the books on the list and listen to your reader's heart. Is it vibrating for more? Is it sending out a signal to stay in the list and keep going? The books are curated to vibrate on the same wavelength. Most of these lists are compiled exactly as I read them on my own journey into a deep dive. The curation notes will tell the story of how these books came together and the language they speak through similar vibes and themes. I've read them all. These are not books found through a Google search or slapped together because they seem similar; I experienced these books inside and out.

You will find that this book is not one giant list, but multiple lists broken down by specific requests I have received over the years through social media and my Patreon©. Each book on every list comes with its title, author(s)*, date of publication, publisher, page count, a non-spoilery description, and my thoughts.

May you fall in love with this collection of wonderful dark and disturbing stories as much as I did.

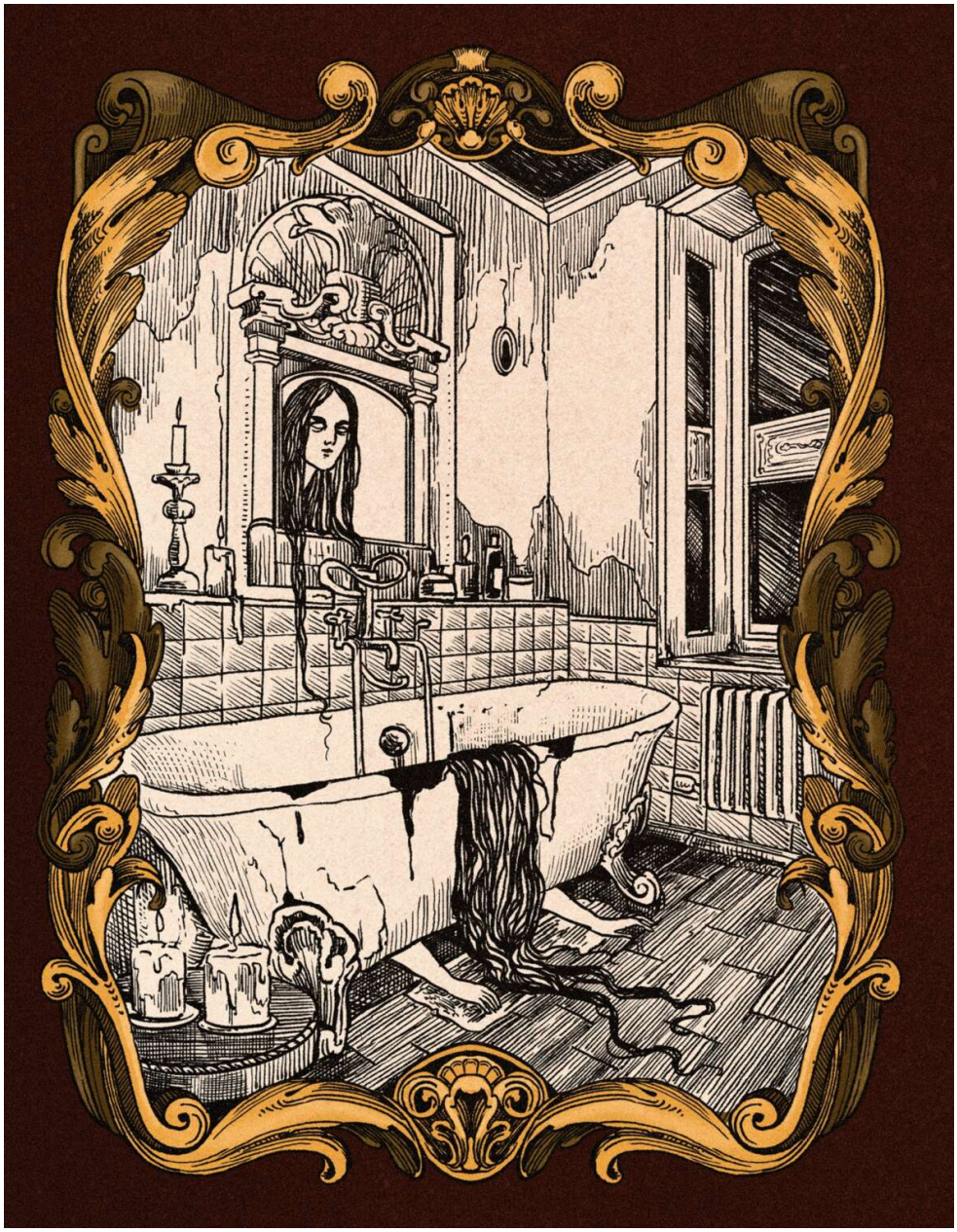
Note

If you have a very specific trigger that will completely ruin your day if you stumble into it blindly during a book, please reach out to me on social media and ask me if that specific trigger is in the book you're about to read. I will do my very best to answer that question for you and if I don't know the

answer, I can find it for you. I don't want anyone to have a bad day.

* *Please note: Any author who does not identify as she/her has personally approved of being included in this collection, and their correct pronouns have been listed.*

Twisted Haunted Houses

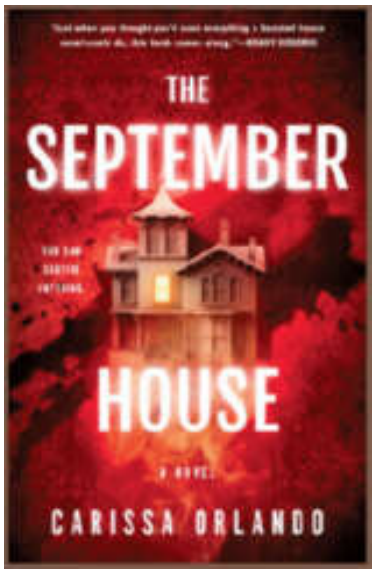


Welcome to Twisted Haunted Houses, where creaking doors and ghostly whispers are too basic. Get ready to expect the unexpected. This is your go-to reading list for haunted house tales that go beyond all your expectations. Sentient mansions with minds of their own, cursed architecture reshaping reality, and houses that are

homes to dark entities first, people second. If you work up the nerve to stand at the threshold and look inside, expect psychological illusions that blur the boundaries of time and space. Your comfort zone and sense of safety are now a playground for nightmares. Perfect for readers looking for something new, these books have twisted the definitions of "haunted" into their own brand of terror.

Book Vibrations: *death & dying, domestic drama, domestic violence, family secrets, ghosts, lies & betrayal, paranormal, poltergeists, relationships, unsolved mysteries, vengeance*

The September House



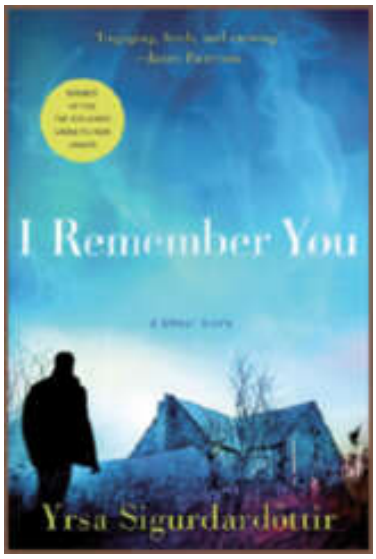
Carissa Orlando
BERKLEY | 2023 | 352 PAGES

Margaret and Hal move into the beautiful Victorian home of their dreams as empty nest-ers. Every year in September, blood oozes from the walls to form thick puddles on the floor. Ghosts of all ages and temperaments make themselves known; sometimes they leave the kettle boiling on the stove or rearrange the furniture but sometimes they scream, lash out, and bite. Margaret, a woman trained to "live by the

rules," who commonly says, "Everything is survivable," decides she loves the house and refuses to give up on anything she loves. Hal isn't as steadfast. When Hal goes missing, their daughter Catherine shows up to help her mother find him. She doesn't know the secrets inside her parents' home, and Margaret is determined to make sure her daughter never finds out.

My Thoughts: One of the most unique haunted houses I've encountered lately, this house has retained a record of the wrongs committed within its walls. The ghosts seem to operate on a time loop until they successfully convince the current tenants to help them. Margaret, who is the narrator and current tenant, and her husband Hal desperately want to stay in their haunted house. Margaret has such a warm, familiar voice where you can almost physically see her in the flesh. And what a relatable woman! It's hilarious how she calls the ghosts in the house "pranksters" and how when they soil her belongings with spilled viscera, her only lament is about having to clean it up or throw it away: "My nicest dishtowel!" Such a refreshing twist we never read in horror: a person who accepts the paranormal activity and tries to coexist with it. About halfway through the book, secrets begin to unravel and truths are told. It becomes clear why Margaret is so determined to stay in her house of horrors. This book had me craving more unusual hauntings.

I Remember You



Yrsa Sigurðardóttir (2010) translated by Philip Roughton
MINOTAUR BOOKS | 2014 | 384 PAGES

A married couple and their friend, who recently became a widow, are determined to renovate a house in an isolated village by the sea. The longer they stay in the home, the more they feel uneasy as they continuously encounter unexplained occurrences inside and around the property. In a somewhat nearby small town, a doctor with a tragic history is putting together the pieces of a complex mystery through bits of information he has been gathering from his patients.

My Thoughts: Sometimes when a book has two different narratives happening, I fall in love with one more than the other, but this is the first time where both stories captivated me: like a two-for-one special! This is a haunted house ghost story and a crime thriller investigation rolled into one book. The haunted house storyline is genuinely so creepy with all kinds of bone-chilling bumps and creaks in the night, paranormal sightings, and strange occurrences. The other narrative follows this murder mystery that reads like a thriller—plenty of clues and puzzle pieces to fit together as the tale advances. Waiting for the two stories to converge was my favorite. I gathered clues and formulated theories as to how the two stories were connected. Not your typical haunted house book at all—all the

ways in which the author layered the two plots together was a stroke of genius.

I highly recommend enjoying the audiobook edition of this book on hoopla™. The narrator has a beautiful accent, perfectly and properly pronouncing all the Icelandic names of people and places (I never would have guessed how to say them in my head). One of the best audiobook experiences I've had.

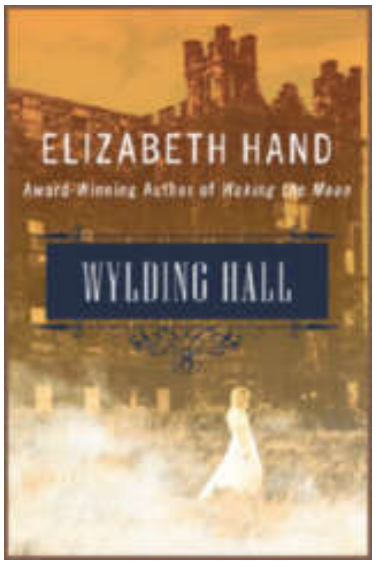
Tell Me I'm Worthless

Alison Rumfitt (2021)
TOR NIGHTFIRE | 2023 | 272 PAGES

Rumfitt reinvents the haunted house trope with an intimate and daring twist. The House at the core of the story is a malevolent, predatory force that selects its prey, feeds on their fears, and uses their pasts as weapons against them. Its grip is suffocating; its influence unavoidable. And when it takes Hannah as its chosen victim, her estranged friends, Alice and Ila, must put aside their deep-seated resentments to confront the House—and each other.

My Thoughts: Brace yourselves. This is not a haunted house you venture into; this is a house you allow to invade you. The heart of this book lies in its characters' fractured relationships: a friend group haunted by past betrayals and irreconcilable differences. Alice and Ila are not heroes risking everything to save a friend. They're survivors: deeply flawed, deeply wounded, and profoundly human. The weight of their histories together makes the journey even more gut-wrenching as they enter the House not to save Hannah, but to survive the House's merciless unraveling of their identities. Rumfitt's prose attacks with gnashing teeth. Her descriptions are grotesque and unflinching. The horror escalates through graphic depictions of sex and violence, gore, and abuse; it's supposed to feel uncomfortable. Not horror as catharsis as I so often say, but horror as a confrontation—a mirror held up to the ugliness we try to bury. As far as twisted haunted houses go, this one is the twistiest.

WYLDING HALL

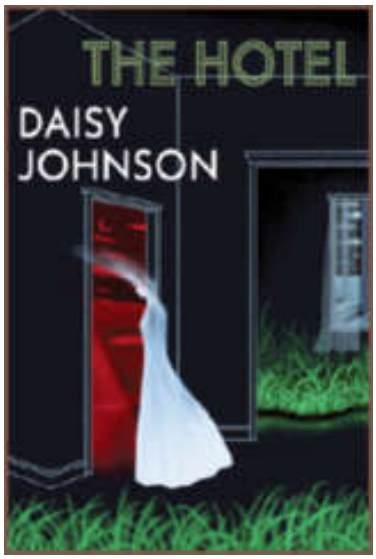


Elizabeth Hand
OPEN ROAD INTEGRATED | 2015 | 174 PAGES

How does a haunted house story crossed with British fae folklore crossed with a documentary-style format sound? Oh, and the characters are all in a band, sort of like Fleetwood Mac. The band is looking to reconnect and sort things out after their lead singer suddenly dies. They end up at Wylding Hall in an ancient, isolated area of the English countryside. They're writing music, recording, and tangling themselves up in all kinds of interpersonal drama—meanwhile, their new lead singer disappears while they're out there.

My Thoughts: This novella has short chapters that are just one cliffhanger after the next. I recommend setting aside a large chunk of time so you can comfortably read the whole book in one sitting. You won't be needing any bookmarks for this one. The way this is written like a Netflix™ documentary is so compelling! You will start developing theories and drawing closer to favorite characters and then, suddenly, it's almost over and you'll rush to social media to see who has read it so you can discuss. I recommend this one for a book club read. The vibes mirror those of *I Remember You* with similar themes of isolation and a small village nearby. It would be fun to read these two back-to-back.

The Hotel



Daisy Johnson
JONATHAN CAPE | 2024 | 160 PAGES

On a piece of cursed land, where evil can be sensed in the very soil, stands a Gothic-style hotel. Fourteen tales tell stories of different women held in place by the hotel's insidious magnetism. These stories were written by Daisy Johnson and performed/narrated by several actresses for a BBC radio program that aired from September to October 2020. Readers can enjoy this book in its intended audio format or buy the hardcover book of the collected stories. (I found a UK edition at Blackwell's and had to have it.)

My Thoughts: I'm dubbing this book my personal version of *House of Leaves.* I love Daisy Johnson's storytelling style and the way these stories share the same shape-shifting location—this brooding Gothic hotel on the fen.

"It's bigger on the inside than the outside.
Do not go into Room 63.
Doors and windows do not stay in the same places.
The Hotel listens when you speak."

Incredibly feminist, this collection is a fusion of classic Gothic horror vibes with a modern twist. Bite-sized doses of dread, each

one is perfectly crafted to feel like pages from a found journal. Some are dark fairy tales spun with a sinister edge; others are ghost stories with an elegant, timeless feel. Tying them all together is a cursed hotel on rotten land and a focus on the experiences women face. And the *vibes!* It's an atmospheric, feminist showcase of a whole host of characters facing a variety of danger. The hotel walls hum with horror. Wickedly clever, this book proves that horror doesn't need footnotes or funky formatting to mess with your mind—it just needs one cursed building that preys on women year after year.

Just Like Home

Sarah Gailey (they/them)
TOR BOOKS | 2022 | 344 PAGES

Just Like Home *follows a woman named Vera returning home to see her ailing, estranged mother wasting away in her childhood home filled with complicated memories. Vera's father committed horrific acts in the infamous Crowder Home. Now she must deal with long-buried secrets and a new secret living in the guest house.*

My Thoughts: This book is a gift that keeps on giving. It's equal parts haunted house, serial killer thriller, and modern Gothic. There's nothing traditional or predictable about it, just one shocking revelation after the other. I loved following Vera through her childhood home as she wrestles with complicated feelings about her mother and memories of spying on her father. And my favorite part comes at the end, so I can't disclose that here for you now, but I can promise you this: You will never see it coming. It's one of those endings that readers either love or hate, and I fall into the "love it" category. This was my introduction to Sarah Gailey's work, and it made me sit up a little straighter in my chair and take note.

LINGHUN

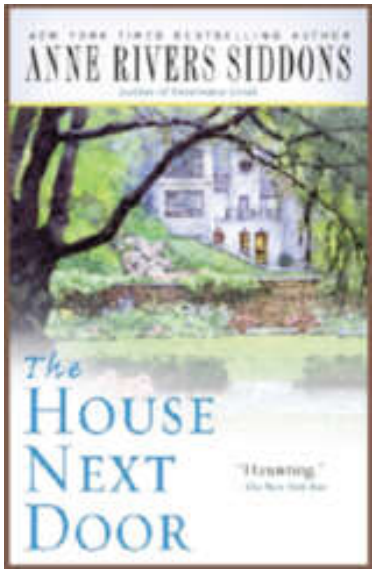
Ai Jiang
DARK MATTER INK | 2023 | 178 PAGES

I always tell people that this book is a twist on classic haunted house tropes because it answers the question, "What if a haunted house was home to people haunting ghosts instead of ghosts haunting people?" Ai Jiang drew inspiration from her own experience with grief and

traditional Chinese beliefs about death and the afterlife to tell the story of one family's desperate refusal to let go of a loved one.

My Thoughts: The way this story moves upon your heart deserves a fair warning: You will encounter your deepest feelings, and it will crush you a little bit. One of my favorite qualities of horror is the way an author can meet us, the readers, right where we're at; all of us at once. Maybe some readers are in various stages of grief but, universally, we have wrestled with the pain of losing someone we love. The catharsis of investing in the lives of fictional people as they go through similar trials of life that we have gone through is priceless. It's also one of the safest ways to allow our feelings to bubble up to the surface of our hearts so that we can empathize, relate, and work through some things without the emotional labor of vulnerability—it's magical.

The House Next Door

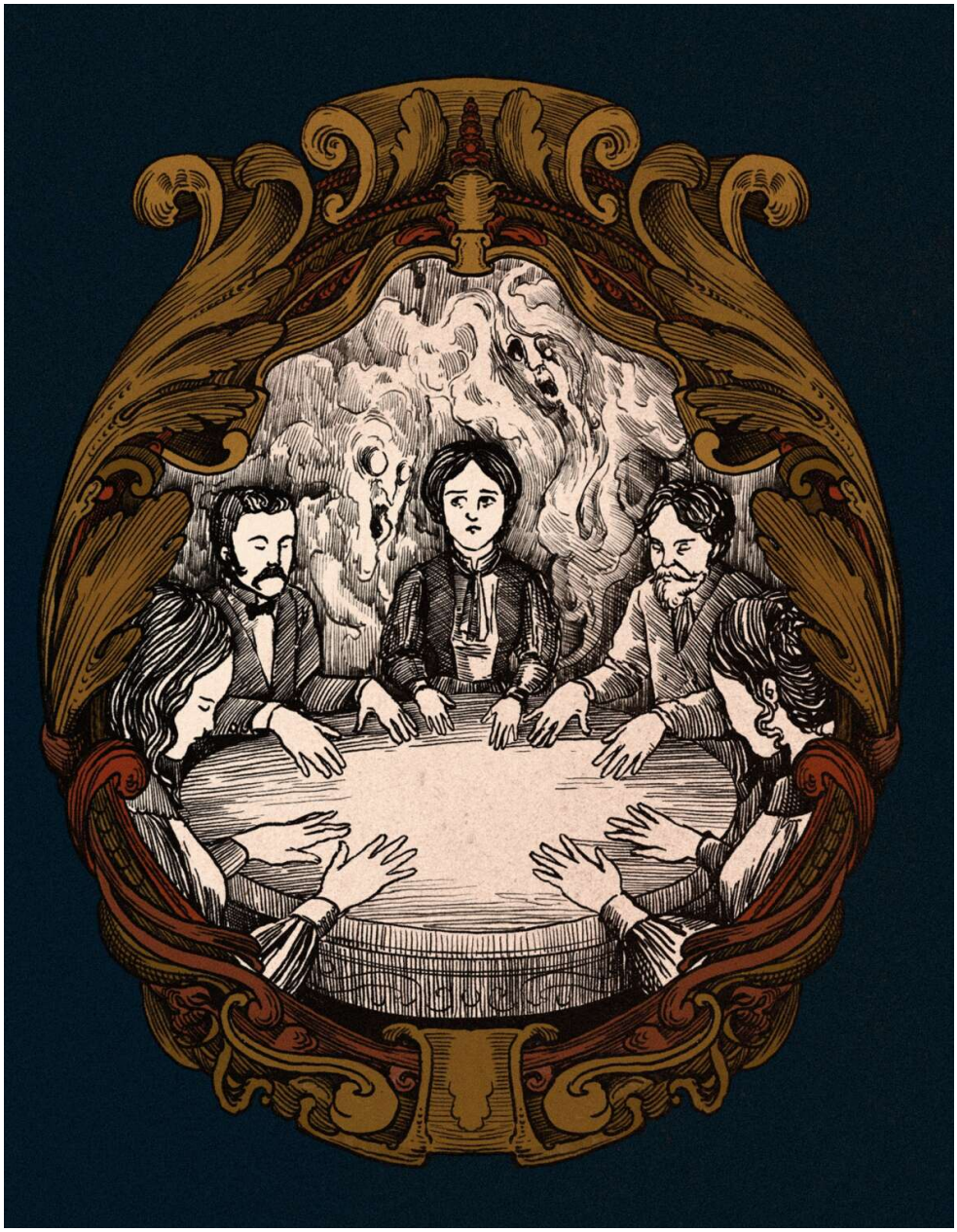


Anne Rivers Siddons (1978)
GALLERY BOOKS | 2007 | 368 PAGES

Colquitt and Walter Kennedy move into an uppity suburb of Atlanta. They meet their neighbors, who become friends, and the Kennedys slowly start feeling settled in their new life. One day, the undeveloped land next to them starts buzzing with the activity of new construction. When it's finally finished and the new neighbors move in, everyone in the neighborhood comes to realize that haunted houses are not always old and abandoned; they could be the brand-new house right next door.

My Thoughts: I could have easily put this book in the Ladies of October list, but *The House Next Door* is a bit of a one-off for Anne Rivers Siddons and it's a classic horror one-off for haunted house tropes too. This is a slow-burn, southern Gothic tale with a strong lead-up to a satisfying climax. The characters are all unlikable, so I enjoyed watching everyone's sense of security in their elitist lifestyle come apart at the seams. As far as haunted house books go, this stands apart from the pack. The fact that the house is a new build is a unique twist and serves the story quite well. There are some unusual elements that feel a little ridiculous—I don't want to spoil it too much, but the house has a personality that it expresses through the way it haunts its guests. See for yourself! I'm glad I read this book in this season of life rather than earlier in my horror journey because I now have the context to clearly recognize its foundational impact on modern horror. It will be fun to see where this book ranks on your list of haunted house books.

I See Dead People

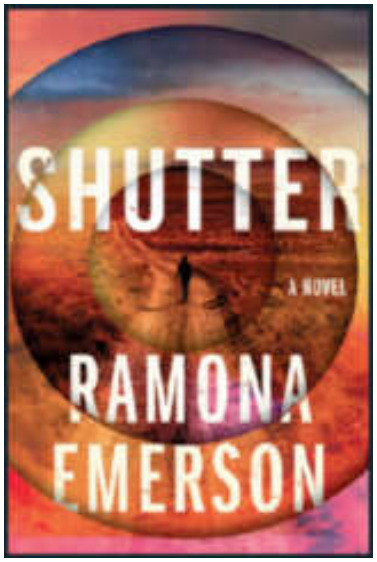


I absolutely love it when the main character has an ability to see dead people and/or communicate with spirits only to learn the ghosts want something from them or are trying to send an important message from beyond the grave. It must be one of horror's oldest and most beloved tropes and is incredibly versatile in leading the

story to go in a variety of directions. Sometimes, the character keeps their gift a secret, which makes them an outsider and creates delicious tension. But every so often, the ability is less of a curse and more of a gift, helping to guide the character into solving the mystery or uncovering important truths. My favorite use of this trope is when the ghost is seeking to reconcile an injustice and forced to use an unlikely or unwilling living person to put the scales of justice into balance. The tension and underlying dread builds as the protagonist must learn how to appease the restless souls—often at a great personal cost. As a challenge, make a mental note of how each main protagonist comes to terms with their unique ability and how they choose to utilize it (or not).

Book Vibrations: *exposed secrets, ghosts, haunted past, injustice, murder, mystery, paranormal, personal investigation or sleuthing, trauma, vengeance*

Shutter

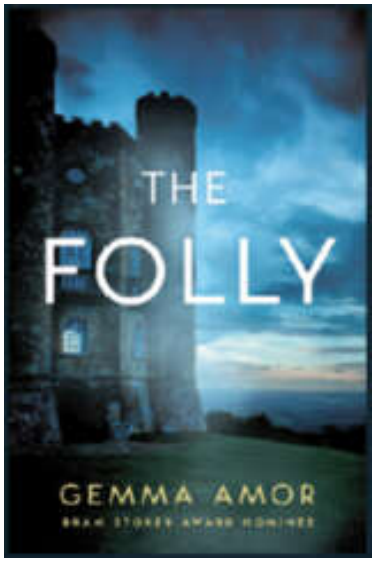


Ramona Emerson
SOHO CRIME | 2022 | 312 PAGES

Dual timelines, working in tandem, tell a compelling story. In the past, we learn of Rita's unique struggle with her ability to see and hear dead people. The present-day narrative follows Rita as she tries to balance her work on crime scenes with the intrusive nature of ghosts vying for her attention and assistance. The ghosts are determined to use Rita to right their wrongs, overlooking the ways her service to them is destroying her life and bringing her too close to danger.

My Thoughts: Ramona Emerson, the author, worked for the police department in Albuquerque, New Mexico for sixteen years. Her experience was so intense that she decided to write a memoir, but it eventually transitioned into a fictional novel about a young Navajo woman named Rita Todacheene, who is a forensic photographer haunted by ghosts. The way she weaves in Navajo beliefs about the afterlife and spirits is both fascinating and chilling. The main protagonist, Rita, is the heroine we've all been waiting for: She's capable and tough but vulnerable and flawed too. I enjoyed the flashbacks to Rita's family life, exploring trauma, grief, and the courage it takes to face your demons in this world and beyond.

The Folly

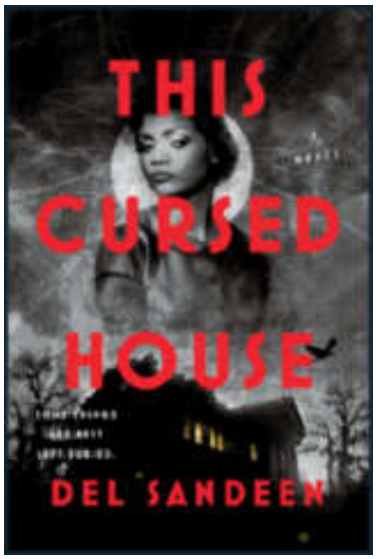


Gemma Amor
POLIS BOOKS | 2023 | 240 PAGES

A man who was wrongly convicted and served time for killing his wife is released after all these years. His daughter has sold the family home to pay legal costs, so the two have decided to take up jobs as live-in caretakers at a dilapidated castle on the coast. The tension between these two is so thick with uncomfortable feelings. Another layer of suspense is added when a stranger comes onto the scene, seemingly inhabited by a spirit.

My Thoughts: In true Gothic tradition, the dead always find a way to shed the light of truth in dark corners. Our protagonist is in distress and full of grief, yet she perseveres. This book feels like a timeless tale that could have been written decades ago—it has those classic vibes. There are some truly bone-chilling scenes. Gemma Amor knows exactly how to take a simmering pot to a full, roiling boil in no time. I loved that I had no idea where this story was going to end up. I was glued to the pages until the final, unnerving conclusion. The way that family relationships play a huge role in connecting all these books might be my favorite aspect of this list.

This Cursed House



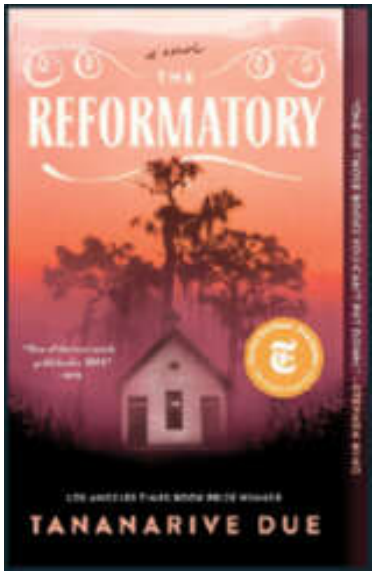
Del Sandeen
BERKLEY | 2024 | 384 PAGES

A young woman leaves her complicated life in Chicago (1960) to take a job at the Duchon family estate in New Orleans. Once she gets there and meets her future employers, she quickly realizes that the family might have ulterior motives showing interest in her. The more Jemma learns about the Duchon family and their secret history, the braver she must become.

My Thoughts: Illuminating the trailblazing ability of horror fiction, this debut novel is a blend of southern Gothic and historical horror that contains haunted house elements infused with important social commentary AND a strong woman protagonist with supernatural abilities. As I was reading this book, I thought about what an excellent choice this would be for some young people venturing out for the first time into the wild and overgrown landscape of horror; though, seasoned horror readers will also appreciate the way horror is used as a vessel to transport readers into a time of heavy racism, classism, and colorism. Some of the historical language I had never encountered before, so it was eye-opening to see those dangerous and painful words through the lens of the main character's perspective. The book cover reads, "Some things are best left

buried." But I'm thankful that horror insists on digging it back up. Some important discussions happen within and because of horror books.

The Reformatory

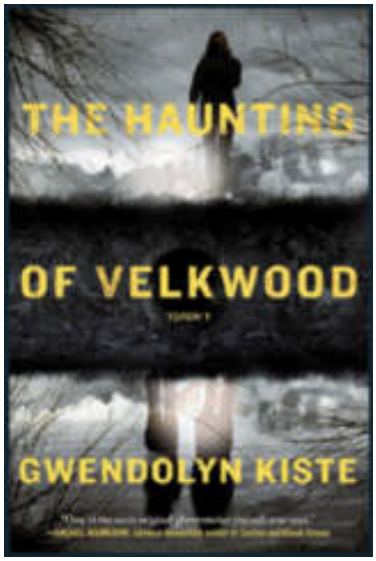


Tananarive Due
SAGA PRESS | 2023 | 576 PAGES

Inspired by true events that took place at the Dozier School for Boys, the author has this to say about writing this harrowing tale, "… grief is the reason it has taken me this long to write this book. But grief is also the reason it exists." *Set in the summer of 1950 in Due's fictional Florida town, Gracetown (which shows up in a lot of Due's stories), this story follows a twelve-year-old, Black boy named Robbie who is sent to a reform school after an altercation with a boy from an affluent family. The school is rumored to be dangerous for boys like Robbie, so his older sister, Gloria, is determined to free him one way or the other. Robbie makes some friends in the school but is plagued by nightmares and spectral visions.*

My Thoughts: As soon as I read several chapters, I knew this book was special. A masterpiece. It's perfect in every way imaginable, leaving nothing to be desired. Crafted with a remarkable gift of storytelling and her personal connection to the story, *The Reformatory* stands with the best of the best. I would shelve this one right next to King's *IT* as iconic coming-of-age horror. This is quintessential horror not to be missed.

THE HAUNTING OF VELKWOOD



Gwendolyn Kiste
SAGA PRESS | 2024 | 256 PAGES

A modern twist on classic haunted house and ghost story tropes: Instead of that one dilapidated house on the block everyone says is haunted, Gwendolyn Kiste sets this story in a whole haunted neighborhood. Talitha Velkwood is contacted by paranormal investigators to see if she would be willing to revisit her childhood home located within the perimeters of an infamous paranormal phenomenon that restricts access to anyone who gets too close. So far, she has been unwilling to entertain the idea, but something is drawing her back in.

My Thoughts: This was an exciting journey into unknown territory. The idea of a whole block of houses suddenly becoming haunted seemed ambitious. I was concerned about the execution, but as soon as I saw where this was going, all my doubts faded away and I became invested in this unusual tale about best friends meeting a strange girl in their neighborhood. The back-and-forth narratives easily transition the reader from the past to the present and back again. It's an unsettling, emotional rollercoaster.

EARTHEATER

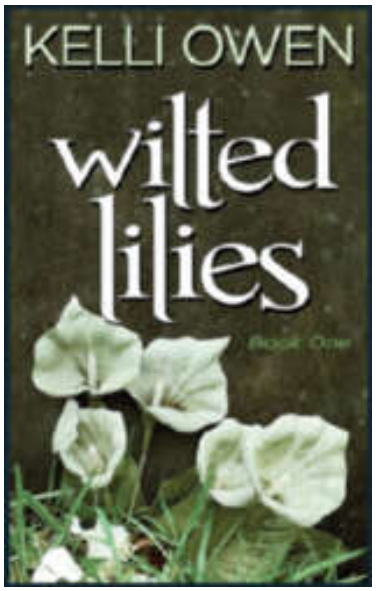
Dolores Reyes (2019) translated by Julia Sanches
HARPERVIA | 2020 | 224 PAGES

In Argentina, a seventeen-year-old girl named Cometierra is troubled by her ability to see visions of missing or murdered people. She tries to keep her ability hidden, but people in the community eventually catch wind that she is an "Eartheater" who can tell them information about their lost or dead loved ones if she puts handfuls of dirt in her mouth. After swallowing the earth, images of missing or murdered people arise in her

mind. Cometierra is reluctant to use her gift; she wants to eat pizza and party with her friends.

My Thoughts: I've never read a book in which I wanted the protagonist to respond to their situation in a very specific way and they just wouldn't. At first, I was frustrated and deeply confused as to why the author chose to tell the story with such a disregard for the reader's hopes. However, sitting with my emotions after finishing, I realized *Eartheater* is exactly what it needed to be; nothing more, nothing less. A painful, heartbreaking coming-of-age story about a young life surrounded by violence and poverty—not even a paranormal gift can save even a single soul. The violence and bloodshed seep into the very soil, the ghosts of the victims of femicide cry out for justice, but the living are reluctant to hear. This book also vibrates with the list What Women Say About Femicide in Latin America Through Horror Fiction.

Wilted Lilies (Duology)



Kelli Owen

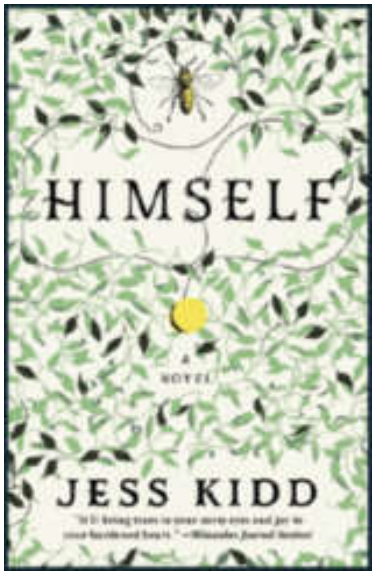
CREATESPACE | *WILTED LILIES* (2015) 98 PAGES | *PASSAGES* (2019) 211 PAGES

Book one introduces the reader to Lily May Holloway, a young woman who barely escapes her kidnapper with her life, telling her story to Detective Travis Butler. We learn that Lily has a special ability which will assist authorities in solving another case related to Lily's. Book two, Passages, *follows Lily as she starts a new chapter in her life as a student at McMillan Hall, a private school for young people with psychic gifts like Lily. Learning to adjust to her new surroundings is exciting and dangerous.*

My Thoughts: These two books are so criminally underrated. I think together, they have thirty reviews on Goodreads©. Yes, they're indie and self-published. But Kelli Owen is a good, capable writer who brings Lily May Halloway—and her special gift of communicating with dead people—to life on the page. In book one, I immediately invested in her. There's something so tragic and broken about her, all alone in the world, tragedy after tragedy, and yet, the grace of her inner beauty and strength shines through. You cannot help but fall in love with her. These books combined are the length of most novels, and if you enjoy young, loveable protagonists, psychic

abilities, character-driven horror, and eerie scenes that will raise the goosebumps on your arms, the Wilted Lilies series is for you.

HIMSELF



Jess Kidd
ATRIA BOOKS | 2017 | 384 PAGES

A man named Mahony is raised as an orphan and finds out his mother, Orla, might have been murdered. He goes to the small village where she was last seen and rents a room at an inn. He makes fast friends with an eccentric, elderly lady staying there and the caretaker at the inn. We learn that Mahony can see the dead—sometimes they're helpful. With his newfound friends and the company of ghosts, Mahony investigates his mother's disappearance. The village proves tough to navigate with a host of suspicious characters full of secrets and lies.

My Thoughts: Not everything in Jess Kidd's fairy-tale-like story is magical or quirky; some of it is downright horrific. There is a surprising death of a dog that destroyed me, so I'm warning you about that now so at least you can choose to ruin your day. When I

turned the last page and closed the book, I knew in my heart I would be quickly returning to Jess Kidd's company for more storytelling. I loved the expertly crafted balance of horror, humor, and heart.

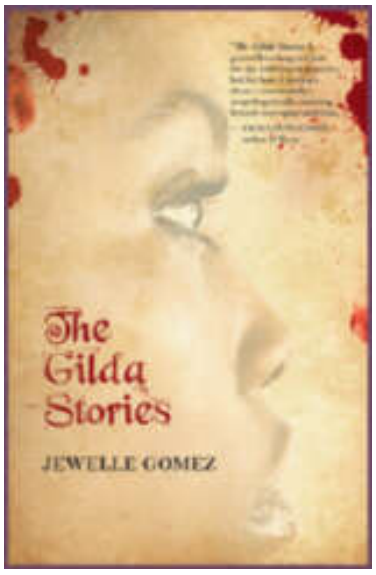
Bloodthirsty

I read through these books back-to-back myself, so the order is exactly the way I experienced them: a deep exploration of vampire life through the female gaze. I noticed intimacy and relationships were emphasized more than bloodlust but don't assume these stories lack teeth—they do bite. Most iconic literary vampires are male, but

Carmilla by Sheridan Le Fanu predates them all and is narrated by a teenage girl who attracts the attention of a mysterious girl her own age named Carmilla—a creature of the night. The novella is rich with Gothic atmosphere with its old, crumbling castle, detective of the occult, a wealthy widower, and Carmilla's secretive nocturnal activities. It is unapologetically sapphic; the two main protagonists are in love/lust with each other and it's so refreshing to see it fully out in the open, no subtlety or subtext, just the stark juxtaposition of committing acts of violence to survive with the dynamics of eternal love between two women. The following list of books captures the essence of Le Fanu's original mysterious and seductive mood—vampires seen through a softer, more relationship-focused lens.

Book Vibrations: *aristocracy, blood, dark, eternal life, Gothic, hedonism, historical, jealousy, lush prose, lust, moody, obsession, opulence, retellings, revenge, romance, sapphic romance, secrets, sensual, sexual relationships, social isolation, vampirism, violence*

The Gilda Stories



Jewelle Gomez

FIREBRAND BOOKS | 1991 | 252 PAGES

Beginning in the 1850s, Gilda, a formerly enslaved young woman, narrowly escapes a violent attack by defending herself with a knife. Fearing for her safety, she takes refuge at a brothel and meets the owner and her lover. The couple graciously adopts Gilda into their home and family; ultimately teaching her their peculiar, eternal, bloodsucking lifestyle.

My Thoughts: Start your bloodthirsty journey with this tragically underrated masterpiece—shoutout to NoveList Plus for listing this book as a read-alike for *House of Hunger*. I never would have heard of it otherwise. I hope that more readers will fall in love with it as much as I did, and it will get a new lease on life.

Gomez sets the paranormal activities of her vampires inside historical fiction horror. The real threat to humanity in *The Gilda Stories* isn't the bloodsucking vampires, it's the predatory, patriarchal behaviors of colonizers. Gilda is rescued from a life of enslavement and taught to feast with purpose and dignity. Her centuries-long journey is filled with lessons of love and loss; the beauty of death and the strength that comes from an eternal life of earned wisdom through experience. Traditional vampire aesthetics comprised of fangs, capes, coffins, and bloodlust are noticeably absent, replaced with vampires moving through life with an air of sophistication and a reverence for humanity.

"We take blood, not life, and leave something in exchange."

I'm so thankful I discovered this book through my library's recommendation.

A Dowry of Blood

S. T. Gibson
REDHOOK | 2022 | 304 PAGES

A woman named Constanta is near death when a handsome stranger rescues her and brings her lifeless body home. He transforms her from a woman with nothing, not even her life, into a woman with everything. In keeping with the epistolary style of the classic book by Bram Stoker, Gibson's protagonist, Constanta (Dracula's newest wife) narrates the book as a series of letters leading to a confession. A stark contrast from the selfless vampires in The Gilda Stories, A Dowry of Blood *reimagines the iconic image of Count Dracula as a narcissistic womanizer rescuing damsels in distress for his own selfish gain.*

My Thoughts: Hypnotic and seductive almost to the point of intoxication, I was helpless against the relentless pull of Gibson's prose. There are strong themes of domestic abuse, psychological manipulation, and sexual obsession that underscore the deeply romantic and sensual relationship between Dracula and the women he seduces. As you can imagine, things get wickedly out of hand. I never thought I would enjoy a book so steeped in sex and romance, but I suppose a vampire ménage à trois entangled in a bitter love triangle for all eternity is its own kind of horror story. This book

feels like a cult classic and reminds me of reading Anne Rice for the first time.

VIVIA

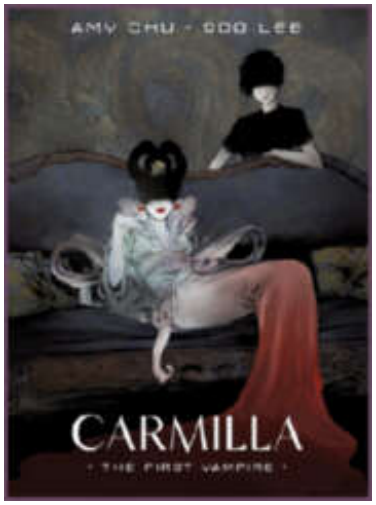
Tanith Lee
IMMANION PRESS | 1995 | 342 PAGES

Written in the ’90s, Tanith Lee’s erotic, brutally violent vampire novel is the blueprint for all the seductive, sexually charged vampire novels to come. Vivia is the daughter of a vicious war lord. She discovers a strange dwelling underneath her father’s castle. She encounters a deity living there and is transformed by its power. When she emerges from the underground lair, the war is over and everyone she once knew is dead. Vivia is taken captive by a prince and kept as his concubine and feeds on the bodies of the young women the prince brings to her.

My Thoughts: I discovered this novel in my research for this list. After reading it, I hesitated to include it because of the graphic and explicit sex and violence. However, it’s not my job to censor anyone’s access to quality books and *Vivia* is expertly written. This

was my first time reading Tanith Lee, but I made a note to seek out more of her work. Her storytelling voice is decadent.

Carmilla: The First Vampire



Amy Choo illustrated by Soo Lee
BERGER BOOKS | 2023 | 112 PAGES (GRAPHIC NOVEL)

Sheridan Le Fanu's sapphic vampire classic novella, Carmilla, *predates Bram Stoker's* Dracula *by twenty-five years. Amy Choo updates it for modern audiences by setting it in New York City during the AIDS epidemic, infusing it with Asian mythology and culture, and introducing modern-day conflicts.*

My Thoughts: I read this on the library app, hoopla. I highly recommend seeing if this is available to you because the graphic novel in-app reader allows you to view each panel as a zoomed-in, isolated work of art in the exact order they are intended. Plus, if you have older eyeballs like mine, you can easily read the small print. The artwork is pure eye candy. When the character Violet is introduced, I swooned over the colorwork and Violet's irresistible

beauty. Visual horror in the form of a graphic novel retelling very old vampire lore is an essential experience.

A Long Time Dead

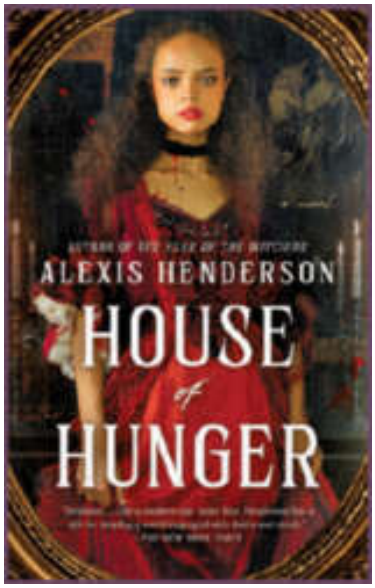
Samara Breger
BYWATER BOOKS | 2023 | 412 PAGES

Poppy is a woman of the night who wakes up in a rural cottage with an abnormal, savage bloodlust. She learns that another woman, Roisin, has been given the responsibility of her year-long education and care as a fledgling vampire. Poppy cannot leave the cottage—she's too dangerous. After a few weeks of spending every waking and sleeping moment with her new caretaker, maybe Poppy doesn't want to leave, but Roisin is distracted with a plan for revenge—she wants to kill the ancient vampire that turned both her and Poppy.

My Thoughts: This might be the sexiest, spiciest book I've ever finished. I don't typically reach for horror erotica with an emphasis on erotica, but there were so many appealing aspects to this story that drew me in: I'm a sucker for vampires (that should be a T-

shirt), the atmosphere is Victorian Gothic, it has a revenge plot, and there is sapphic romance. Representation matters, especially in horror fiction, which sees a lot of heteronormative relationships. This romance was so soft, romantic, and refreshing, reminding me of Hailey Piper's essay "Make Horror Queer as Fuck" in my first book, *101 Horror Books to Read Before You're Murdered.*

HOUSE OF HUNGER



Alexis Henderson
ACE | 2022 | 304 PAGES

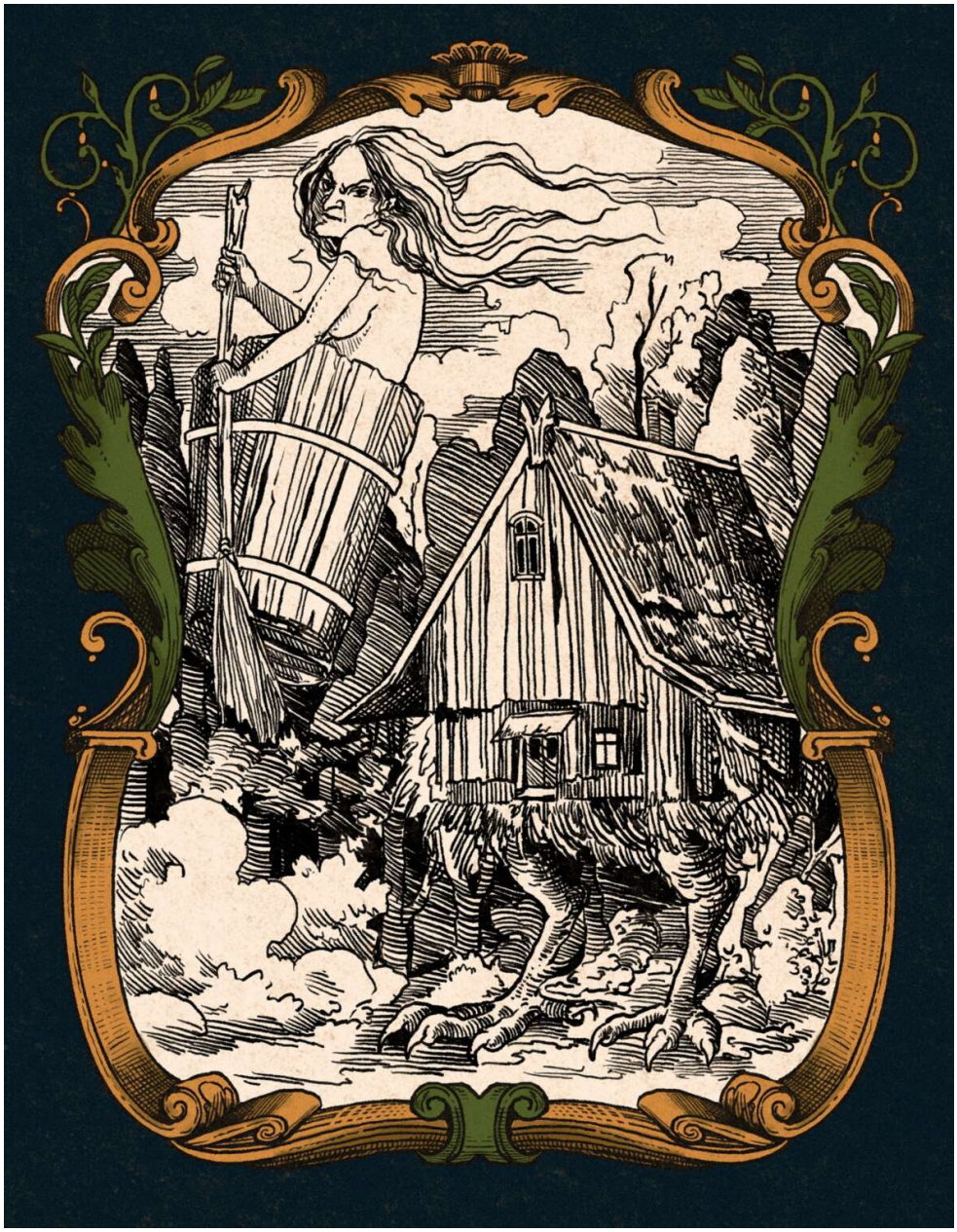
Marion Shaw lives in poverty, works for a wretched woman at a terrible job, and comes home to her abusive brother who spends all her hard-earned money. Until she sees an advertisement to become a bloodmaid:

"WANTED—Bloodmaid of exceptional taste. Must have a keen proclivity for life's finer pleasures. Girls of weak will need not apply."

All she must do is bleed for a wealthy mistress in exchange for a life of pampering, opulence, and status. Who wouldn't take up this offer? The man in charge of curating blood for these bloodthirsty aristocrats tells Marion that her blood is especially desirable. Marion is shipped out to the House of Hunger where she will meet her new mistress. In the house, there are other bloodmaids, and she soon realizes there is a ranking history among them with the opportunity to become her mistress's favorite.

My Thoughts: This book is a feast of Gothic decadence, dripping with blood, desire, and the kind of darkly alluring prose that will leave you ravenous for more. Much of this book is filled with female friendships, toxicity, jealousy, and rivalry. Marion is swept up in a world of decadent luxury, social politics, and the intoxicating pull of Countess Lisavet, a seductive and enigmatic figure who hungers for more than just Marion's blood. Henderson knows what her readers want. As soon as Marion got to the House of Hunger, I wanted a makeover scene … and she delivered! But don't forget, this is HORROR, so it takes a dark turn—so unexpected and gruesome. This is more than a story of blood and lust. It's a sharp, cutting look at power dynamics, class divides, and how far someone is willing to go to survive.

Unhappily Ever After: Dark Folklore, Fantasy, and Fairy Tales



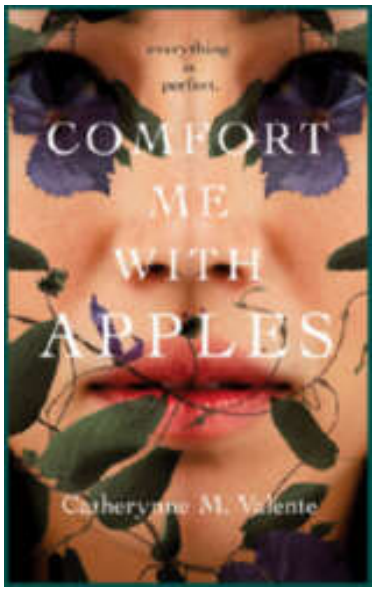
My first bookish obsession was in middle school, after I read *The Hobbit* by J. R. R. Tolkien. Afterward, I only wanted more fantasy—more secret make-believe worlds, more magic, more wizards and strange beasts. Later, when I was thirteen, I read Stephen King's *Salem's Lot*, and my attention turned toward the world of horror. Then when I read Stephen King's The Dark Tower series, I realized that my two genre loves, fantasy and horror, could coexist in the same book. It was a match made in the heaven of my reader's heart.

A cottage deep in the dark, dark woods made from sweets to lure children inside, closer to a witch's oversized oven. A giant beanstalk sprouts from the ground, growing into a thick spiraling vine leading up into the clouds creating a way for an unsuspecting young man to climb his way to danger. The ultimate reading adventure is found in folklore, fantasy, and fairy tales that infuse every page with the dark stain of horror.

Unhappily ever after.

> **Book Vibrations:** *cursed kingdoms, cursed places, danger, dark forests, epic quests, fantastical beasts & monsters, folklore, heroes & villains, heroines who will save themselves, isolated villages, legends, mythology, scary mermaids, talking animals, victory & defeat, witches*

Comfort Me with Apples

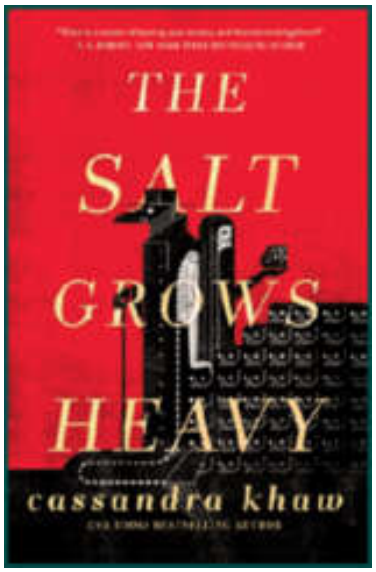


Catherynne M. Valente
TOR.COM | 2021 | 112 PAGES

Sophia lives in a gated community with very explicit rules. Despite having all her needs met and feeling relatively happy, Sophia begins to feel a little unsettled. Her husband travels for work and is away from home for long periods of time. One day, she finds something that has no reasonable explanation, and it starts to unravel her life.

My Thoughts: The way this book reveals its secrets a little at a time is the best part about it. There's an essence of *The Stepford Wives* by Ira Levin and a little of that movie, *Don't Worry Darling* (2022) and so much of that Bluebeard's wife trope. Because of those references, I thought I knew where this was going until, suddenly, a revelation flips the whole story over on its head and the truth is illuminated. The perfect "too good to be true" fable.

The Salt Grows Heavy

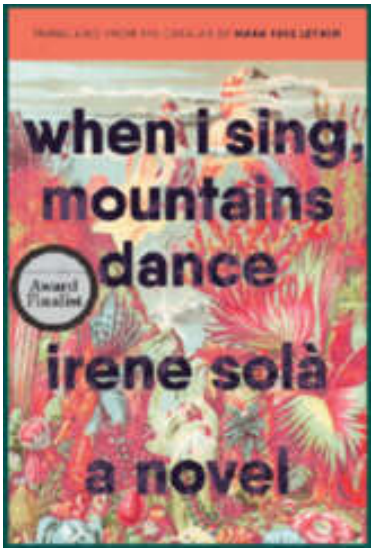


Cassandra Khaw (they/them)
TOR NIGHTFIRE | 2023 | 112 PAGES

The Salt Grows Heavy *is a slim tale that feels reminiscent of timeless folklore and fairy tales. A vengeful mermaid and a plague doctor journey together through unknown territory. They encounter a group of children playing a murderous game and follow them back to an isolated, eerie village with more bloodthirsty children who worship a trio of sinister surgeons.*

My Thoughts: I was immediately absorbed into Khaw's setting and bewitched by the luscious, elegant prose. I enjoyed the feeling of being lured into a fairy tale knowing that Khaw is a horror writer so I could expect something sinister. It delivers so deliciously. I love the "stumbled into an eerie village where the townsfolk are up to something" vibes while still being whimsical/playful but in a dark, creepy way; eventually it transitions quite earnestly into savagery and horror. This is not your garden variety "beautiful mermaid falls in love with a handsome prince," although there is love and the mermaid is beautiful. The "handsome prince" is a plague doctor with a sweet disposition, a quiet demeanor, and androgynous sex appeal. Both characters must rely on the dark side of their true selves in order to survive.

When I Sing, Mountains Dance



Irene Solà (2019) translated by Mara Faye Lethem
GRAYWOLF PRESS | 2022 | 216 PAGES

Catalan author Irene Solà tells interconnected stories from the perspective of the land itself: mountains, mushrooms, animals, and people too—witches, women, children, and men. Set in a small village in the Pyrenees, a family saga is told through generations of trauma, war, feast, and famine. Even the clouds get to open this tale with a brief narrative.

My Thoughts: I can't fully communicate the uniqueness of this book. It felt like the actual story of one singular location as told through all the important elements that have left their mark on that land. So, it had this "not quite fiction" vibe that enhanced the reading experience so much. It all seems so authentic—the witchcraft, the culture, and rituals … and the way the author allows the emphasis to shift from one main character to another establishes a sense of communal importance instead of zeroing in on just one person's

point of view. This is the story about geography from the point of view of everyone and everything that makes up that place. There's nothing like it.

Halloween Fiend

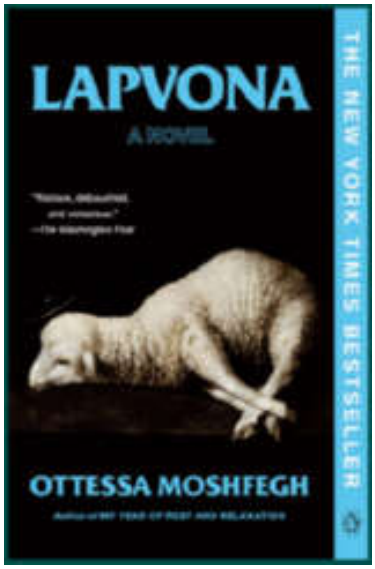
C. V. Hunt (they/them)
GRINDHOUSE PRESS | 2019 | 112 PAGES

A small village is cursed by an entity they call Halloween. Every night, Halloween collects a living sacrifice from each household leading up to the night of All Hallow's Eve, when the ritualistic offering is at its most terrifying.

My Thoughts: Halloween-themed horror is the best. I especially enjoy collecting quality Halloween books to read annually in October, during prime "Spooky Season," but it can also be read year-round. This is one of my favorite Halloween books and it fits perfectly in this reading list because of the folkloric, ritualistic elements, and its atmospheric world-building. The author turned Halloween into a tangible being that seeks to drive its victims insane

with fear so it can feed itself on that energy. Once you read this book, you won't think about Halloween in quite the same way again.

LAPVONA



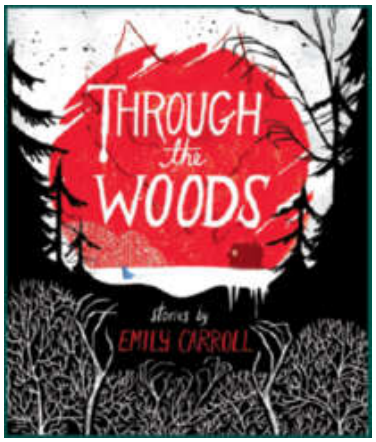
Ottessa Moshfegh
PENGUIN PRESS | 2022 | 320 PAGES

Lapvona *is a dark fairy tale in a medieval village setting with a prevailing atmosphere of dread and terror. The story follows a disabled teenage shepherd, named Marek, and Jude, but we also become intimate with other characters in and around this isolated village. The deeper the reader gets into the book, the more grotesque and unsavory it becomes. There's a witch who is a wet nurse for grown males, infanticide, cannibalism, abuse, and almost every other despicable thing one could imagine. A medieval, feudal town exploited by power, classism, and inequality—a cautionary tale, essentially.*

My Thoughts: This book is such a peculiar turn for Moshfegh. It feels like an outlier to her collective body of work, almost like she

had something to work through—something deeply personal. It reads like an author trying to say, “Look at the world we live in. We’re all so fucked up and do horrible things. How does anyone survive it?” I knew right away that Moshfegh used the repugnancy in *Lapvona* to provoke a visceral response because that’s who she is as a writer. A reader cannot engage with her storytelling and walk away from it unaffected. *Lapvona* is by far her most challenging.

Through the Woods



Emily Carroll (they/them)
MARGARET K. MCELDERRY BOOKS | 2014 | 208 PAGES
(GRAPHIC NOVEL)

Through the Woods *is a collection of eerie ghost stories, provocative folklore, twisted fairy tales, and haunted horror all told through the magical yet disquieting artwork of Emily Carroll.*

My Thoughts: I believe we never lose our love of picture books. Emily Carroll’s *Through the Woods* is a graphic novel steeped in the essence of dark fairy tales and folklore. Each story feels rooted in the folklore of a cursed forest. The lyrical prose and artwork are vibrant and evocative with a menacing undercurrent. Something

gorgeous can be grotesque. *Through the Woods* reminds us that horror doesn't just exist in novels and novellas. It can be myths and legends passed down in pictures and poems and songs—cautionary tales in the form of adult fairy tales told by those who are lost in the woods. I love the way something visual like this can be sandwiched between two longer books to create a path from one darkness to another.

The Butcher of the Forest

Premee Mohamed
TOR.COM | 2024 | 160 PAGES

An evil ruler, known simply as the Tyrant, has lost his two children in a dangerous forest. He summons Veris Thorn, the only woman who survived a rescue mission when her own child disappeared. Veris faces certain death either way but hopes to last long enough to see the Tyrant's children safe on the other side.

My Thoughts: This book brought me right back to my love of dark fairy tales and fantasy. It reminds me of my favorite movie *Labyrinth* (1986) with the race against the clock to save innocence in an unforgiving landscape of hidden dangers. There were elements of *Alice in Wonderland* every time Veris encountered a stranger determined to delay her journey. Veris even says at one point in the story, "Nothing is as it seems in this place." And if those two comps don't sway you, it also gave me *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe* vibes with various mythical creatures (a fox man, unicorn, and the guardians) and an elusive evil presence that I can't elaborate on. It's best to just allow readers to enter these strange, dark woods all by themselves.

Pretty Little Dead Girls

Mercedes M. Yardley
CRYSTAL LAKE PUBLISHING | 2016 | 260 PAGES

This is the tale of a beautiful, ethereal girl with a dark, deadly prophecy looming over her head. Bryony Adams, "Star Girl," is destined to be a

murder victim but she doesn't let that stop her from trying to find romance. As soon as Bryony comes of age, she decides she wants to see more of the world, try new things, and meet boys. So she leaves the safety of her little bubble and ventures out on her own.

"… love is ever so shiny and desirable and so desperately worth pursuing, we are told, and so two Kens, a Nick and a Johnny later, she came across a Jeremy, who was tall and darling.
'You're going to die Star Girl' he said, his thick lashes dropped over his eyes.
'Yes, I know.'
'That's cool.' "

My Thoughts: Sometimes this book reads like it's straight out of Grimm's fairy tales and sometimes it felt like a modern serial killer thriller. I enjoyed the whimsical, sickeningly sweet prose in juxtaposition with the pitch-black subject matter—the threat of murder haunting Bryony's every decision. It's a horror story about murder and death infused with hope and wonder. It's a romance that twists the genre and bends it toward horromantasy. It doesn't shy away from the grim, melancholy themes of a short existence; rather it celebrates it in a way that feels magical. This is a hidden gem I hope more people will discover.

The Lover

Silvia Moreno-Garcia
AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES | 2023 | 43 PAGES

Forbidden desires and longings run rampant in a small village nestled up against the deep, dark woods. Sisters Judith and Alice have no idea what awaits them during one especially long and violent winter season.

My Thoughts: This story is so sensual and moody; imagine a Grimm's fairy tale repackaged as a bedtime story for grown-ups. I love the wanton, selfish behavior of Judith as she brazenly undermines her sister's happiness to satiate her own appetites. I loved to hate her, but secretly cheered her on too—what happens to women who get everything they want? Read this dark tale to find out. And if you want to read even more deliciously dark tales about sisterhood, check out.

The Short Sharp Shocks! Series for Kindle Unlimited© or $1.50 to Buy

Don't sleep on these four books in the Short Sharp Shocks! series by Demain Publishing. They are available as physical

paperbacks, but they're also fun to read on your Kindle for a quick bite of quality horror.

- *The Lost Girl & Spindleshanks* by Alyson Faye (book 58 in the series)
- *Asylum of Shadows* by Stephanie Ellis (book 3 in the series)
- *Bits* by R. A. Busby (book 43 in the series)
- *An Invitation to Darkness* by Hailey Piper (book 33 in the series)

Don't Go in the Woods

In *101 Horror Books to Read Before You're Murdered,* I confessed my deep hatred of camping. The hot, molten magma core of this hatred is a seed of fear rooted in our collective, cultural tendency to vilify forests and dark wooded areas. I mean, look at the childhood fables and fairy tales we all heard when we could barely walk. Hansel and

Gretel? Eaten by a witch in the woods. Little Red Riding Hood? Eaten by a wolf in the woods wearing her grandma's skin. Rapunzel? Locked in a tower in the woods. Everything bad happens there. The trees cloak wickedness in darkness, hiding evil from the light of truth—anything can happen in there where nobody can find you and you're lost, unable to find your way home.

BOOK VIBRATIONS: *creatures, folk horror, folklore, forests, haunted, legends, lost, missing people, mythology, natural obstacles, paranormal & supernatural activities*

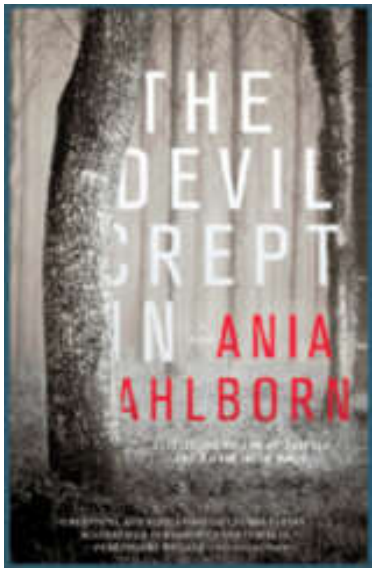
JACKAL

Erin E. Adams
BANTAM | 2022 | 336 PAGES

The main character, Liz, returns to her hometown for her best friend's wedding. The familiar setting brings back painful childhood memories of a night in the woods when another friend of hers went missing. On the night of the wedding, her best friend's own daughter goes missing in the woods. Liz was the last one to see her and feels responsible. The deeper Liz gets into the investigation, the more the past catches up to the present.

My Thoughts: Once the conflict is introduced, in classic thriller form, everyone becomes a suspect, and you can't help formulating theories as to what's happening. But this one will surprise you. Erin E. Adams definitely takes this story in an unexpected direction. Liz is pulled into a complicated web of missing Black girls whose disappearances all lead back to the same sinister wilderness. *Jackal* masterfully reimagines classic horror tropes, layering it with social commentary and survival. The woods are a place of transformation and terror, but they're also an ominous, ancient threat preying on the vulnerable and marginalized.

The Devil Crept In



Ania Ahlborn
GALLERY BOOKS | 2017 | 384 PAGES

Nestled in a small, rural town called Deer Valley, Oregon, Stevie's best friend and cousin, Jude, vanishes into the dense forest surrounding the area where they often play. The town, and especially Stevie, are on high alert—bad things have happened in and around those woods. An

unusual number of mysterious deaths and disappearances have plagued Deer Valley for a long time. Stevie is determined to find Jude before his faithful companion becomes one of the countless missing who are never found again.

My Thoughts: I enjoyed the way this book feels like two separate stories that ultimately merge into one. Not quite like a dual narrative, but more like an inevitable confluence of circumstances, where readers become absorbed into two different stories and are left to wonder how the two shall meet. It was the first time I ran across a supernatural mystery structured like that and I will never forget the way it enhanced my reading experience. I'm also a junkie for coming-of-age stories and stories told from a child's point of view. Stevie comes from a dysfunctional family, which is tough to witness firsthand, but it also is an effective way to raise the stakes because I was so emotionally invested. Stevie has to succeed in discovering what happened to Jude so that we can know what happened to the missing children before him and prevent more kids from disappearing too! My heart felt like it was pinned to my chest outside my body the whole time. A vulnerable, disturbing, high-stakes missing child story with so much more going on in those woods than meets the eye.

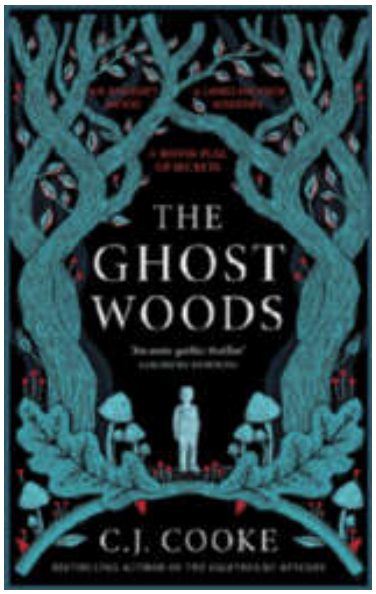
HUNTED

Darcy Coates (2018)
POISONED PEN PRESS | 2020 | 464 PAGES

A young woman goes missing in a popular wooded tourist destination. Her parents and her friends are unwilling to just stand by and wait for the police to investigate every last detail so they take matters into their own hands. Once her camera is discovered with unusual photographs on the film, things get even more intense.

My Thoughts: I listened to the audiobook and enjoyed getting lost in these woods looking for Eileen. The back-and-forth narrative between different characters and groups of people made the listening hours fly by. It is a long book, but the chapters are short, and Coates is the master of leaving readers on a cliffhanger, so you're compelled to find out what happens next. My favorite character was this friend of Eileen's named Todd, who ventures off into the woods on a mission to be the one to rescue the damsel in distress. I could visualize him perfectly: not really an outdoorsman but determined to come to Eileen's aid. At some point, all my theories as to what was happening were tossed out the window with a few surprises. Bring this one on your next outdoor adventure!

The Ghost Woods



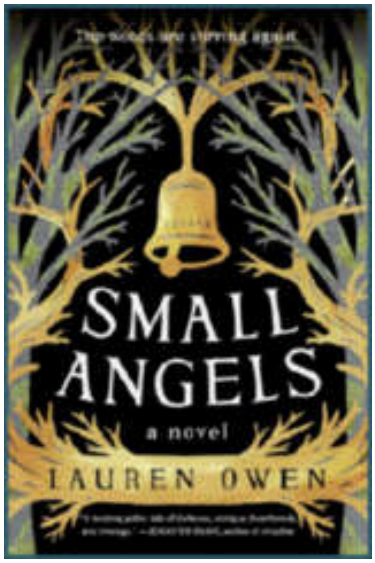
C. J. Cooke
HARPERCOLLINS | 2022 | 408 PAGES

Dual narratives tell the stories of two women: Pearl in 1965 and Mabel roughly ten years earlier. When both women's families discover they are pregnant out of wedlock, they are sent away to Lichen Hall to give birth —a remote manor hidden away from the rest of the world deep in a dark, wooded pocket occupied only by women in various stages of pregnancy and motherhood.

My Thoughts: Something about this book gave me dark academia vibes even though there is no schooling or classes, but I think this is due to the nature of the dynamics and relationships between the young mothers and the all-women staff. There are bullies and "the new girls," secrets and rivalries. The atmosphere is so absorbing. The book is 400+ pages, but the pages fly with short chapters and a back-and-forth timeline. I did end up enjoying Mabel's timeline a little more, but not enough that I felt disappointed with Pearl's timeline. *The Ghost Woods* is a perfect example of cozy horror: There are plenty of creepy scenes and eerie descriptions but there aren't

any gruesome acts of violence or disturbing imagery. Best read on a rainy day, under a snuggly blanket, and with copious amounts of tea.

Small Angels

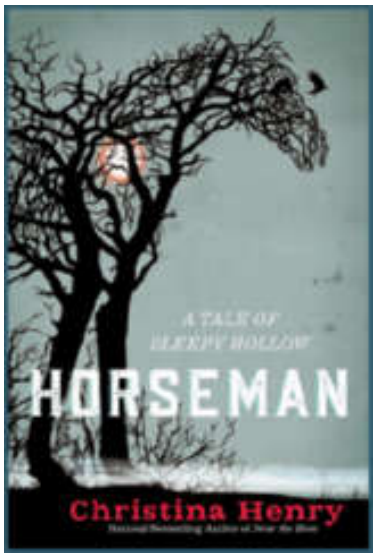


Lauren Owen
RANDOM HOUSE | 2022 | 400 PAGES
Mockbeggar Woods. The synopsis had me at Mockbeggar Woods. The village people know the dangers of venturing out into the woods behind Small Angels Chapel. Chloe is to be married in the tiny, traditional chapel, but when she goes inside for the first time, something deep in the woods is awakened, much to the horror of the village and all who live there in the shadow of an ancient threat.

My Thoughts: It wasn't until I started reading more and more Gothic and folk horror books in the last two years, that I discovered the presence of fae folk and fairies in horror. But they're here, and of course—they're not very nice. The magical realism in this book is dark with a hint of whimsy, quite like *Horseman: A Tale of Sleepy Hollow* by Christina Henry. The atmosphere is so unique to this

author's skillful command of the language, I haven't experienced its likeness anywhere else. It's quite arresting. Like sitting at the feet of a storyteller, with the lights turned down low, and fire popping and crackling in the woodstove. I could live in these pages and read descriptions of these wicked woods forever.

HORSEMAN: A TALE OF SLEEPY HOLLOW



Christina Henry
BERKLEY | 2021 | 320 PAGES

Horseman *is a reimagining of Washington Irving's classic folklore tale,* The Legend of Sleepy Hollow. *I can't think of this story without my mind immediately conjuring up imagery from the Disney™ cartoon adaptation. But* Horseman *is far from whimsically eerie or spooky—it's grim and gruesome. The protagonist, Ben Van Brunt, is the grandchild of Brom Bones and Katrina Van Tassel, and the story takes place a few decades after the legend of the Headless Horseman which put Sleepy Hollow on the map. A mutilated corpse of a child is found in the woods, sending the villagers into a paranoia about the return of the notorious*

Headless Horseman. Ben begins to investigate the mystery so he can save his town from the tight grip of fear choking out all the joy.

My Thoughts: Sleepy Hollow is a small, rural village surrounded by a thick, dark forest. The townsfolk know that strange things happen in those woods all the time, so there is a sense of dread and foreboding as soon as the storyline begins to unspool. I was not expecting this reimagining to be so dreadful; I was pleasantly surprised. Christina Henry is the queen of taking classic folklore and putting a dark, sinister twist on it. I love that she fills in the gaps of beloved stories that are a little thin on character development or backstory (or both!). I feel like *Horseman* elevates *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* with more intricate details and modern themes today's audience can relate to, such as identity, legacy, and community.

Modern Middle Grade Horror from Women Authors

A Reading List Curated by Author Ally Russell

Ally Russell is the author of *Mystery James Digs Her Own Grave.* She released her debut middle grade book *It Came from the Trees* in July 2024. I absolutely loved it. I highly recommend it if you or your young horror reader enjoy:

- Nature but struggle with being outdoors/camping
- Telling ghost stories around a bonfire with s'mores
- Fond memories/nostalgic vibes of camping with siblings, friends, or schoolmates
- The classic horror trope of adults never believing kids when something crazy is happening
- Feeling brave when a best friend needs you
- Urban legends and "Don't Go in the Woods" tropes
- A strong woman protagonist

Ally Russell is the author of *It Came from the Trees* and *Mystery James Digs Her Own Grave.* She grew up on a steady diet of Halloween parties, horror films, *Unsolved Mysteries*, and Goosebumps books. She has always loved scary stories. After getting her MFA from Simmons University, she eventually got a job working in children's publishing. She hails from Pittsburgh—ground zero for the zombie apocalypse. Ally lives with her husband and her two black cats, Nox and Fury. She's afraid of the woods, the dark, and heights. Here are her recommendations for middle grade horror from women authors:

- *The Girl and the Ghost* by Hanna Alkaf
- *The Creepening of Dogwood House* by Eden Royce
- *Read at Your Own Risk* by Remy Lai
- *The No-Brainer's Guide to Decomposition* by Adrianna Cuevas
- *Artie and the Wolf Moon* by Olivia Stephens
- *Hide and Seeker* by Daka Hermon
- *Spirit Hunters* by Ellen Oh
- *A Totally Factual Field Guide to the Supernatural* series by Insha Fitzpatrick

For more of Ally's wonderful thoughts on reading, you can visit her website at www.allyrussellbooks.com.

The Horror is So Close: Fairy Tales and Horror Stories

by Christina Henry

There is this kind of storytelling that we call a fairy tale: a story where ordinary people encounter evil witches and talking foxes and princes turned into frogs. These tales—and their somewhat earthier counterparts, folk tales—can be defined by what I might call a matter-of-factness in the telling. Naturally, the little man with the mysterious name who appears before the miller's daughter can actually spin straw into gold. It's never questioned, nor is it explained. He simply *can*. There is an excess of princes turned into an assortment of animals who will, naturally, be saved by the love and conviction of an ordinary young woman. These young women seem remarkably sanguine considering their circumstances, really. I can't say I'd be so if *my* husband were a polar bear.

This straightforward quality comes through because the stories retain the oral character of the storytellers, despite the fact that they have been written. You can almost hear a woman's voice at the hearth, telling the children about the singing, springing lark while the fire flickers in their widened eyes. What these tales also share, and what makes fairy and folk stories the clear ancestors of modern horror, is that the terror is so *close*. There is a witch in the woods whose house is made of candy, who lures hungry little children there so she might eat them. There is a wolf in your grandmother's house, waiting to convince you to climb naked into bed with him. You are just an ordinary traveler on a journey and suddenly there is a beast threatening you who wants to marry your daughter.

These things didn't happen to people long ago and far away, despite "once upon a time." That time could be yesterday. These things

could happen to you. The forest was likely on your doorstep, and therefore the wolf could walk directly to your door.

The best fairy tales rely on both that intimacy and the listeners' belief. The best horror stories rely on that, too—they rely on you believing that *of course* Regan is possessed by a demon. Modern reasoning cannot make sense in *The Exorcist,* though a couple of characters in the story have a stab at it, speaking psychology like it will explain the unexplainable. And the horror has crept right into the home via a silly toy, a Ouija® board that Regan discovers in the basement. Of course, in horror stories, there is nothing more threatening than a child's toy—a board game that invites in the uninvited, a haunted doll that inspires murder. The home is a terrifying place to be, what with all the potentially threatening objects just lying around.

Horror, more than its literary cousins, fantasy or science fiction, can simply state its premise and convince you to go along with it. There's no elaborate world-building required—a magic system with convoluted rules, a political dystopia with an extensive history behind it. Yes, there is a boogeyman under the bed. Yes, the house is not sane. That is that and if you're going to keep reading, you'd better accept it, and in a hurry.

Daphne du Maurier's "The Birds" doesn't explain why the birds have begun gathering, nor why they relentlessly assault people with such determination. The birds are simply there, and are, and in order for the story to work, you can't seek explanations or ask questions. The birds are attacking, in any case, so the best thing to do would be to take cover, especially since they appear to be forcing themselves down the chimney.

That said, stories that stick with you often create a kind of folklore of their own that lends additional veracity to the current storyline. In Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House,* Dr. Montague tells his rapt audience that, "Hill House, whatever the cause, has been

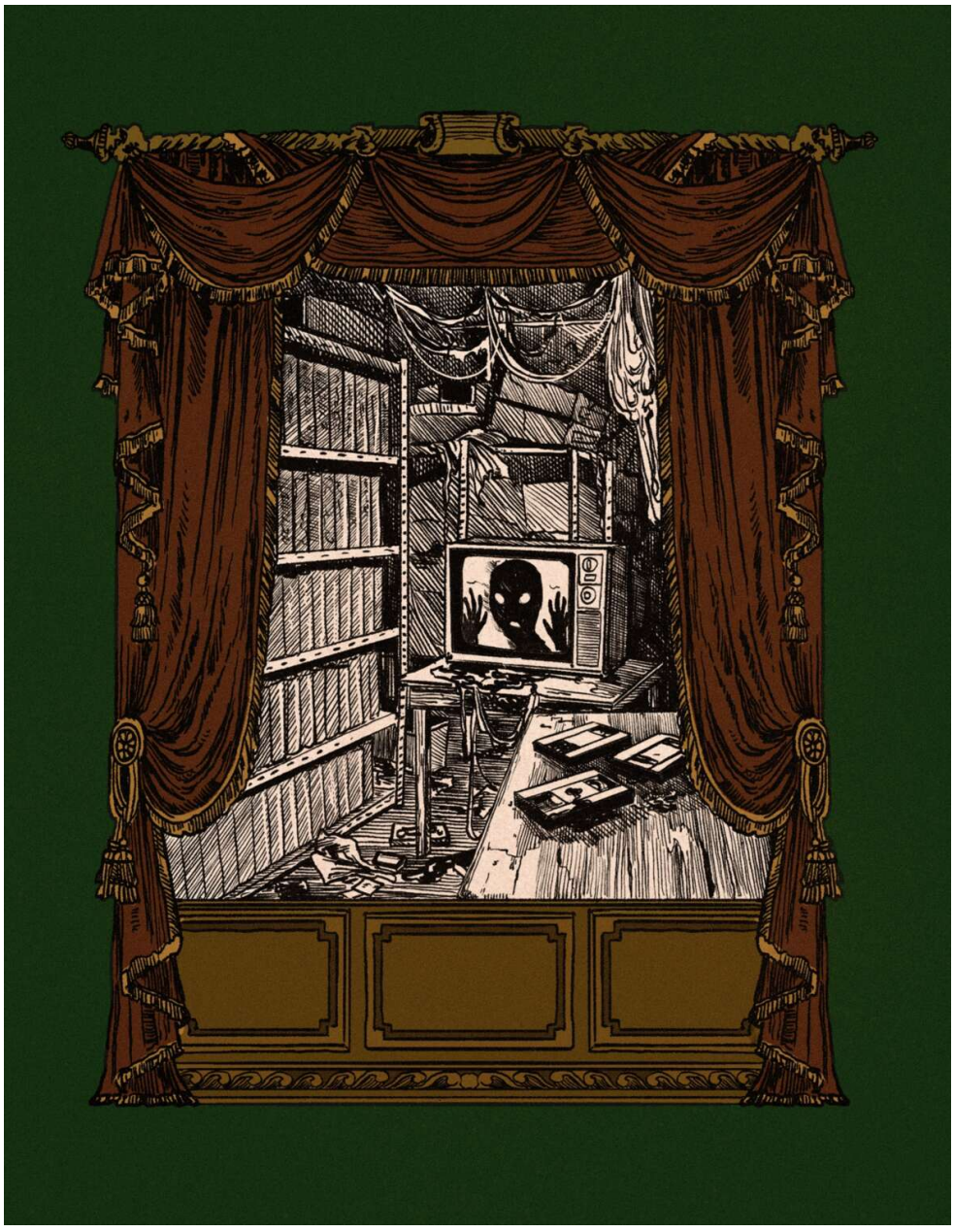
unfit for human habitation for upwards of twenty years." He then proceeds to catalog his somewhat scanty knowledge of suicide and madness and other strange behaviors associated with the house, and these previous events lurk in the background of the story, hovering, waiting to inflict the same on the current occupants. It is not that the house is, somewhat vaguely, *haunted.* It is that the house itself is diseased in some way, and as we all know, diseases are catching.

Fairy tales and horror have always been intertwined. Those princes I referred to earlier—the frogs, the bears, the lions? What is such an enchantment if not body horror, the loss of control of your very self? The young women sent to marry those princes are possibly the earliest renditions of virtuous final girls, the ones who vanquish the witches and goblins and so forth and overcome all obstacles to happiness.

It doesn't take much looking to find fairy tales in horror, whether their antecedents are obvious (as in a reimagining) or not. We are all playing a game of telephone with the tellers who came before us —hearing their stories, molding them to our own personalities and times, creating something new for the next generation of storytellers to craft and change.

Christina Henry is a horror and dark fantasy author whose works include *The House that Horror Built, Good Girls Don't Die, Horseman, Near the Bone, The Ghost Tree, The Girl in Red, The Mermaid, Lost Boy,* The Chronicles of Alice series, and the seven-book urban fantasy Black Wings series. She enjoys running long distances, reading anything she can get her hands on and watching movies with samurai, zombies and/or subtitles in her spare time. She lives in Chicago with her husband and son.

Documentaries, Cursed Films, and Found Footage



Where were you when you watched *The Blair Witch Project* (1999)? Not the first found footage horror ever but arguably the one that popularized the subgenre. This film made a huge impact on me.

That feeling of watching something that feels real but knowing it's only fiction and having to remind myself over and over that the director made the movie to look real—these unsettling things didn't really happen. And that ending! Could something so simple ever be that scary again? One time I made a list of my favorite books with *Blair Witch* vibes and called it "Found Footage Horror" and this journalist told me there's no such thing. Found footage is a subgenre for movies only. So, here is a list of books to read if you believe found footage can be found in books too. Spoiler alert: It can. *wink*

Book Vibrations: *documentary-style storytelling, epistolary narratives, fan theories, film crews, found media, inspired by true crime, missing people, movie production, murder mysteries*

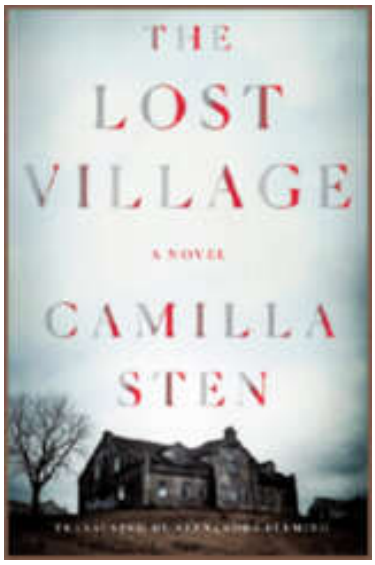
Final Girl Theory

A. C. Wise
PSEUDOPOD.ORG | 2012 | 36 MINUTES (AUDIO)

Wise builds an entire universe around this fictional, cult classic horror movie titled Kaleidoscope *and its star, the actress who plays the Final Girl.* Kaleidoscope's *fanbase call themselves Kaleidophiles. They manically obsess about the film frame by frame, deconstructing it, studying every second, every line, every breath. The story descends into fan theories expressed in reddit-forum style. Why? The extreme nature of the violence. It could be real. The narrator addresses the audience with a high level of knowledge about the film. At first, it's almost documentary-like in tone but later, this changes.*

My Thoughts: I must kick off this list with my favorite horror story in this specific subgenre of cursed films and found footage. I enjoyed this story in a dramatic audio version on Pseudopod.org and that's the way I would want you to experience it too—the narrator is exceptionally talented. But if you really can't do audio, you can buy the short story collection, *The Kissing Booth Girl and Other Stories* by A. C. Wise, published by Lethe Press (2016). The storytelling style is so cinematically detailed and realistic, I forgot (several times) that this was a fictional story. After reading this quintessential found footage story, I bought another A.C. Wise story collection, *The Ghost Sequences,* filled with even more found footage horror! A. C. Wise truly is a master of the craft and my go-to favorite when I'm in the mood for a journey into these themes and vibes.

The Lost Village

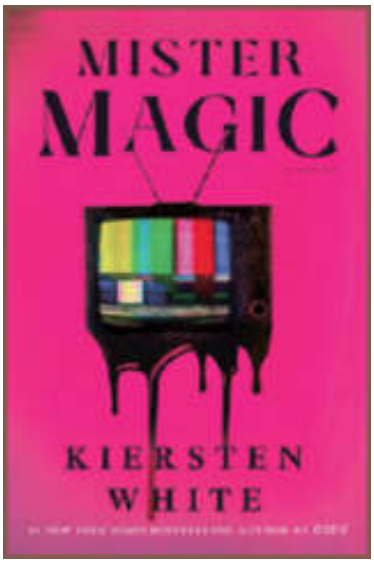


Camilla Sten (2019) translated by Alexandra Fleming
MINOTAUR BOOKS | 2021 | 352 PAGES

The people living in a remote mining village in Sweden disappear in the late 1950s. Alice, the granddaughter of one of the villagers who moved away before the tragedy, decides to go on location to film a documentary about "Sweden's one and only ghost town!" Alice and a few of her friends quickly learn that they have gotten into something way over their heads.

My Thoughts: Short chapters and a dual timeline with more cliffhangers than you could ever imagine tell this eerie story in a compelling horror-thriller mash-up style you can't put down. Lucky me, I read it as an audiobook, so I didn't even need a bookmark. I loved the "now and then" storytelling style. Both stories are perfectly unsettling and become increasingly more vexing as layers of truth are revealed. This book is well suited for this list, but it would pair nicely with *I Remember You* by *Yrsa Sigurðardóttir* as well. They both have "ghost town, murder mystery, haunted by the past, and investigating a mystery" vibes.

Mister Magic



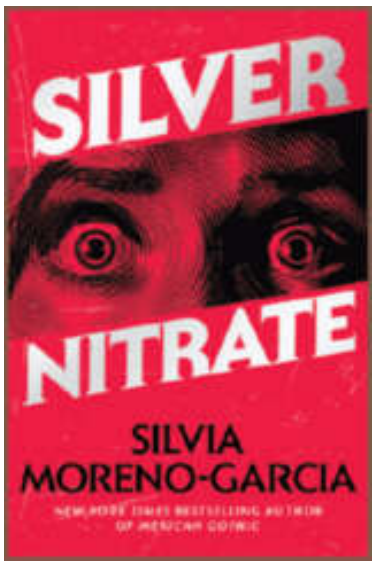
Kiersten White
DEL REY | 2023 | 304 PAGES

Mister Magic *was a serialized radio show for children that transitioned into a TV show in the 1930s. The child cast members were known as the Circle of Friends and have a cult following of devoted fans. A tragedy halted production and everyone went their separate ways but never forgot the cultural phenomena that binds them together. Each one has dealt with the past in their own way, trying to move on and forget. Now it has been thirty years since the show's last episode, and someone is trying to bring them all together again for a reunion.*

My Thoughts: I love the trope of something happening to a group of childhood friends and later in adulthood, they must come back together to deal with it again. Almost like I have been chasing the high of Stephen King's Loser's Club from *IT* and their fight to kill Pennywise once and for all. *Mister Magic* centers on this kid's show that everyone has some memory of but there is no physical proof it ever really existed; also known as the Mandela effect. The storytelling is part alternating point-of-view narratives and part mixed-media sections of emails, text messages, fan message boards,

and this amazing Wikipedia entry. The best part of this book is the ambiguity of the show and the way the author leads readers right to the edge of this rabbit hole of mystery and helps us get stuck. *Mister Magic* is surprisingly vulnerable and intimately shared by the author; I wasn't expecting the story to go in the direction we ended, but I'm so thankful we went there. It's one of those books that I finished and thought, "I really needed that."

Silver Nitrate



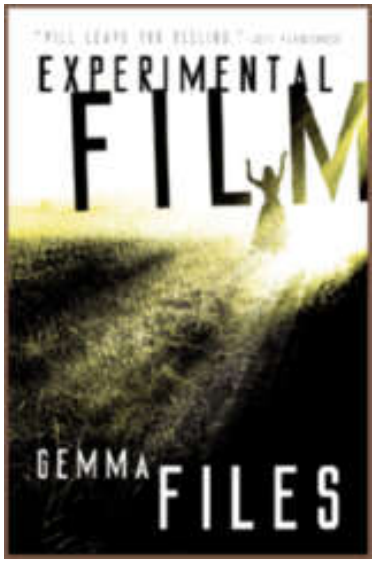
Silvia Moreno-Garcia
DEL REY | 2023 | 336 PAGES

Montserrat (Momo) and Tristán are best friends. She is one of the few women working in the film industry as a sound engineer. She's sassy, independent, and smart. Her best friend, Tristán, is a handsome soap opera star. He's the opposite of her: needy, attention-starved, always in or out of a doomed relationship, problematic with substance abuse, but still sweet and funny and endearing. The two of them together are wildly entertaining. Once the storyline develops into a mystery, Momo and Tristán find themselves wrapped up in a very real, very active, secret

cabal of occultists. An old curse is somehow reactivated, targeting Momo and Tristán, so they must find a way to seal off the curse and get out alive.

My Thoughts: Momo and Tristán are one of my favorite literary best friends. The banter and romantic tension between them create an authentic intimacy that serves the story well. They would do anything for each other—the kind of high-stakes horror I enjoy the most. My favorite aspect of Moreno-Garcia's brand of storytelling is the incredible attention to detail and the amount of research she invests into it. The historical accuracy, breadth of knowledge regarding filmmaking, and all the Nazi occultism enhance the reading experience by making the reader feel like they're in trusted hands.

Experimental Film

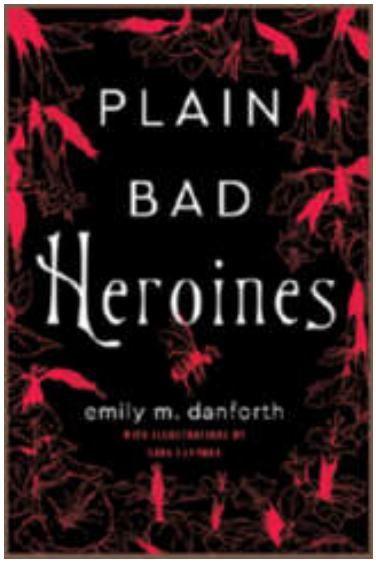


Gemma Files (2015)
OPEN ROAD MEDIA | 2020 | 342 PAGES

A former film critic with an autistic son comes across some of a Canadian filmmaker's found footage files that may or may not be supernatural, or cursed, or both.

My Thoughts: I had to put *Silver Nitrate* and *Experimental Film* in the same list as they both discuss, at length, the former use of silver nitrate in filmmaking and how it was so dangerous—even deadly. I liked discovering this commonality, especially since I read *Silver Nitrate* first. *Experimental Film* touches on so many of my favorite things: someone investigating the mystery behind found footage, the unsettling nature of traditional, cultural folklore—in this case Slavic creatures—and lastly, folk horror. This is an intensely intimate novel in that the exposition is first person; we spend so much time navigating the main character's thoughts. This is an important work of horror fiction because of its intimate representation of disability. The main protagonist, Lois, suffers from an autoimmune disorder which manifests in a variety of ways but primarily chronic pain and physical limitations. This book also explores themes of motherhood and dealing with the emotional and physical labor that comes with parenting a neurodivergent child. I enjoyed how this fragility played out in tandem with the weight of supernatural horrors.

Plain Bad Heroines

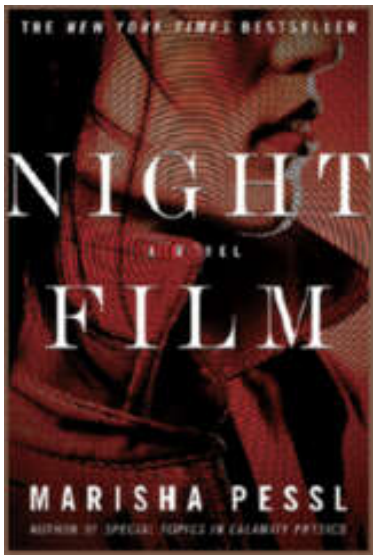


Emily M. Danforth
WILLIAM MORROW | 2020 | 640 PAGES

Mary MacLane was a real-life, American bestselling author at the turn of the 20th century. Her memoir detailing her ambition to be famous and her romantic relationship with her former schoolteacher scandalized readers and sold thousands of copies. It was the inspiration behind Plain Bad Heroines: *a horror comedy about a boarding school with a cursed history and the female students who have lived and loved within its walls.*

My Thoughts: The blending of Gothic atmosphere with the contemporary queer Hollywood twenty-somethings piqued my interest right away. The snarky, sassy, tongue-in-cheek narration, illustrations, and alternating points of view and timelines make the pages of this thick tome fly by effortlessly. Fans of Gothic fiction, horror, and sapphic romance, as well as readers that enjoy found footage and metafiction, will be absorbed into this nested doll storyline.

Night Film



Marisha Pessl (2013)
RANDOM HOUSE | 2014 | 640 PAGES

The story centers on the mysterious death of Ashley Cordova, the daughter of Stanislas Cordova, a legendary and reclusive cult filmmaker whose movies are said to haunt those who watch them. From there, you're plunged into a disorienting investigation with a journalist named Scott McGrath who tries to uncover the truth behind Ashley's death.

My Thoughts: In these current times of social media and celebrities posting every small detail about their lives online, the idea of a mysterious filmmaker whose life is a closed book is very intriguing, almost creepy. Even though this book is over 600 pages long, the pace is fast and urgent; like watching an investigative documentary on Netflix.

The chapters are short and succinct. It appears no word is wasted; everything is pointing toward the investigation leading us down a dark rabbit hole. There is an epistolary element with whole sections of the book told through message board threads, articles, and transcripts: ephemera that people leave behind with the assumption that nobody will ever go back through them the way the reader is now doing on this journey into the investigative process with the

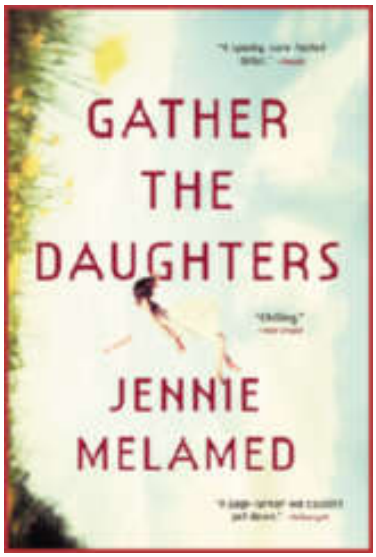
main character. It's one of the most satisfying mixed-media, found footage horror books and needs more love.

Women vs. The Cult

I can't tell you how many times my inbox floods with messages and comments asking for more "rural small towns or isolated locations with patriarchal societies practicing some kind of cultish religion with ritualistic behaviors … and the women fight back!" I'm not surprised; I gravitate toward those stories too. There's something endlessly fascinating about unusual cults and the conflict that ignites when someone dares to challenge authority—especially when that someone is a woman born into the system, or an outsider who sees things for what they really are and refuses to comply. The books on this reading list feature strong women who revolt against the powers that would rather see them silenced. The fight is never easy, and the consequences are often hard to stomach, but it feels so good to root for these characters and shout, GOOD FOR HER!

Book Vibrations: *antiquated ideals about gender equality, misogyny, oppressive patriarchy, rituals, strong religious elements, traditions, witches*

Gather the Daughters



Jennie Melamed
LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY | 2017 | 352 PAGES

During an unknown apocalyptic event, ten men colonized an island and started a new way of living, which includes controlled breeding. During a ritualistic season called The Summer of Fruition, teenagers are forced into isolation, the adults stay indoors, and children live like wild animals on the island. One season, a seventeen-year-old named Janey learns something that changes everything.

My Thoughts: In an act of rebellion against a life chosen for her, a teen girl is starving herself so her body will not mature and she won't be forced into a life of marriage and breeding. She and a few others are investigating, asking "dangerous" questions, and just trying to get to the bottom of this oppressive lifestyle that doesn't work for them. I was so invested in this girl uprising; I could think of little else while this book had me in its grip. Fair warning, there are a lot of sexual traumas but nothing graphic or explicit. Most of the sexual aggression is implied or talked about but not described in the moment. Not that it lessens the impact of what's happening, but the story focuses more on the uprising. I loved the multiple narrators and found myself deeply invested in the lives of these fictional girls.

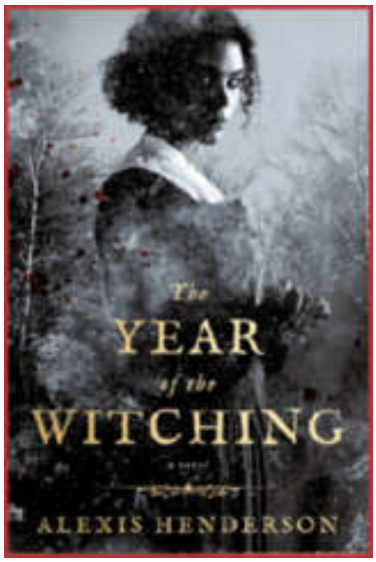
LUTE

Jennifer Thorne
TOR NIGHTFIRE | 2022 | 288 PAGES

Lute is a remote island where community living is idyllic, and the weather is always beautiful. In exchange, every seventh summer, the people of Lute hold a ceremony in honor of preserving their way of life. The main character, Nina, has married Lord Treadway and moved to his estate on Lute. The Treadways have a long history as protectors of the Lute way of life. As the seventh summer traditions loom over their new marriage and growing family, things get increasingly more complicated.

My Thoughts: I'm being so selective with my words in the synopsis for you—the story needs to be protected from spoilers at all costs! All you need to do is read this book. If you love folk horror, if you love a stranger getting involved in some ancient, dark, secretive way of life without knowing what she's getting into fully, read this book. My shoulders were hunched with anxiety while I read the last half. I could not stop until I knew how this was going to end. This is a riveting, atmospheric Gothic and folk hybrid.

The Year of the Witching



Alexis Henderson
ACE | 2020 | 368 PAGES

Immanuelle is a young woman forced into extreme submission to keep even more severe consequences and discrimination at bay. Her mother was unwed at the time of Immanuelle's birth, making her an outsider. Her mother was also accused of being a witch, an adulterer, and consumed by madness. For some reason, Immanuelle is drawn to the forbidden Darkwood on the outskirts of town—she feels a strange

connection there. During one of her journeys through the woods, she is given her mother's journal, which sets her on a powerful path to freedom.

My Thoughts: A captivating, raw, rage-fueled narrative infused with Gothic atmosphere, *The Year of the Witching*'s protagonist, Immanuelle, is the poster girl for resilience and agency. Her journey from outcast to a threat to be reckoned with is a masterclass in showcasing how women can reclaim the narrative in a world designed to silence them. Henderson immerses readers in a world steeped in dark magic and the terrifying realities of dogmatic systems that suppress individuality and punish those who are determined to go their own way. The tension between her insecurities and her will to fight against her oppressors mirrors the struggle many face when standing against powerful authoritative systems. She is so relatable and loveable. This is a perfect pick for fans of "good for her energy" laced with a cocktail of Gothic and folklore vibes.

Conjuring the Witch

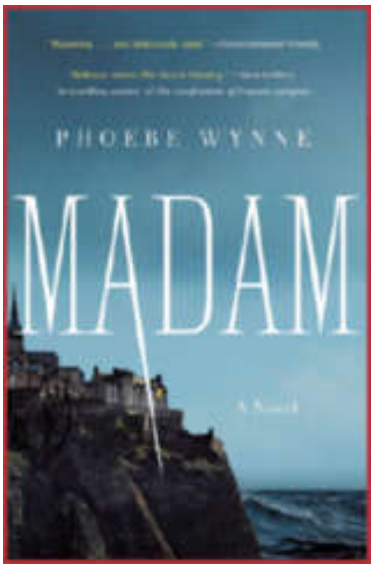
Jessica Leonard

GHOULISH BOOKS | 2023 | 192 PAGES

There's a small religious congregation out in the woods where the preacher makes sure to keep the women in line. He requires the men of his church to help keep the women in line too. Nicole takes a walk in the woods by herself one day and comes back with a message. Out of a desperation to maintain good standing among the leaders, Nicole's husband doesn't know what to think once his own wife is the subject of scrutiny. He's worried about her and their comfortable life. Nicole is only worried about what she saw in the woods.

My Thoughts: I was not expecting this book to be such an intense examination of religious patriarchy. I enjoyed the dynamic between Nicole and her husband, Steve. It was interesting to see how men don't necessarily have to exhibit toxic masculine behavior to contribute to the culture of a small community. Decent men who go along with the flow and are afraid to question anything are just as harmful. It's Nicole who starts asking the hard questions and once she does, my reading enjoyment leveled up. Full disclosure: This book does lean into harmful evangelical behaviors and biblical references, so if you're not in the mood to show up for that, take a flyer on *Conjuring the Witch* until you're craving those vibes.

MADAM



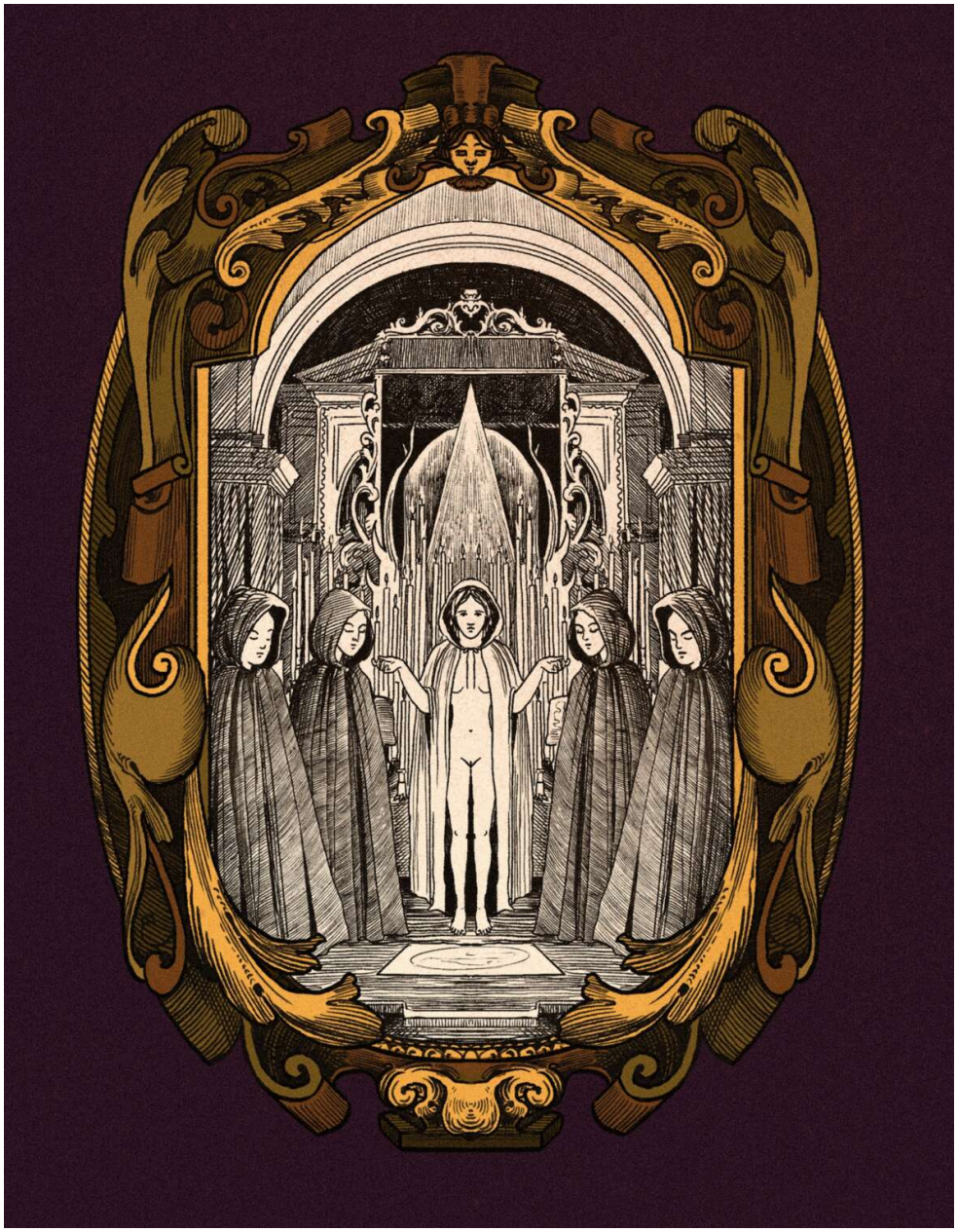
Phoebe Wynne
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS | 2021 | 352 PAGES

Caldonbrae Hall in Scotland is a boarding school for girls with a prestigious reputation. Rose Christie is honored to have been selected among many applicants to teach classic lit. But there are so many rules and traditions, it takes Rose quite some time to adjust to her new life. The more she questions, the more the answers seem troubling. She becomes increasingly concerned about what happened to her predecessor and the hidden purpose of the school.

My Thoughts: This is one of those books for which the audiobook is the right choice. There is a large cast of characters, and it helps to have the narrator keep them all straight with voice changes and personality. I don't think I would have had as much fun just reading the physical book on my own. Sections of classic teacher lessons begin many of the chapters, establishing a little system of foreshadowing. I loved just being at the school with all its dark Gothic halls and the isolated, stormy, seaside setting. I liked the main character, Rose. She has a good head on her shoulders, and she was easy to invest in. The pages fly by as Rose gets deeper and deeper into the mysteries surrounding Caldonbrae Hall and its frustratingly evasive staff. I promise readers will not have the same

experience I had if they don’t try this one as an audiobook. It really comes alive in the same way I have loved serial, dark academia dramas on PBS.

Gothic Secret Societies



Books about secret societies and cults tap into our fear of deception and the unknown. The secrecy surrounding hidden or private organizations suggests a potential power of influence that could possibly be used against unsuspecting people. When something is unknowable or inaccessible except by a few select people,

speculation and assumption act as a breeding ground for conspiracy theories. These theories will often lead to paranoia or hysteria. We're also fearful of the cult practices and rituals, how they recruit new members, and what kind of threat they could pose if left unchecked or ungovernable. These cult members and leaders operate under very little accountability, and any imaginable evil could be plotted or carried out. The following list explores these fears in a variety of ways.

Book Vibrations: *cults, danger, dark magic, ghosts, good vs. evil, isolation, mediums, murder, occult practices, rituals, supernatural*

Little Eve

Catriona Ward (2018)
TOR NIGHTFIRE | 2022 | 288 PAGES

Situated in a remote and isolated location off the coast of Scotland is an odd family made up of women of all ages and their "Uncle." One day,

the local butcher makes an unannounced delivery. Suspecting something is very wrong, he ventures inside and discovers a ritualistic, sacrificial massacre. Narrated from different points of view, the events leading up to the massacre are unraveled until they lead to the incredibly shocking conclusion of what really happened that fateful day.

My Thoughts: An all-time favorite book, *Little Eve* is a gold standard example of Gothic horror. The way Catriona Ward engineered this murder mystery is an exemplary display of mastery. Starting with the setting, we meet an unusual family who lives in a damp, crumbling castle made of stone where the sea washes out the footpath to the isle of Altnaharra during high tide, isolating its inhabitants. I felt like I could see it all in vivid detail due to the rich and vibrant descriptions. An ensemble cast of characters tell their stories with wildly different personalities. I don't know who I loved to hear from most and I looked forward to each narrative as the disquieting tale developed into a more sinister mystery. This is a book I will visit again.

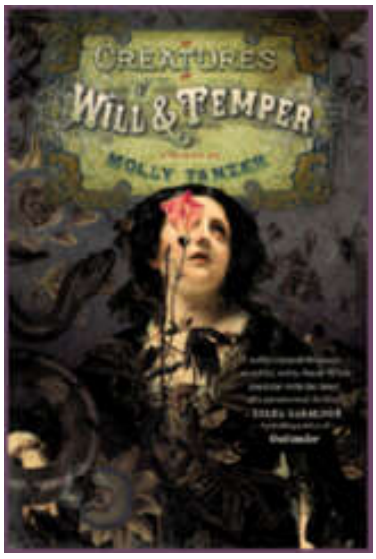
The Death of Jane Lawrence

Caitlin Starling
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS | 2021 | 368 PAGES

Jane Shoringfield has a very specific marriage arrangement in mind when she pays a visit to doctor and widower, Augustine Lawrence. Their marriage would afford her stability and independence in exchange for her services to the good doctor in the form of secretarial work and housekeeping. Surprisingly, he accepts her strange offer and adds a few caveats of his own. Agreements that, at first, Jane blindly accepts, but she later decides she needs to get to know her new husband's secrets.

My Thoughts: I listened to the audiobook, and I cannot recommend that reading experience enough. The Gothic vibes and Victorian era medical aesthetics are perfectly captured by the narrator's delicate and beautiful accent. I love how Jane and Augustine's relationship develops. I don't want to spoil the discoveries, so I'll just leave it at that. Their relationship is paramount to the story. Which isn't to say that the occultism, secrets and lies, and all the strange behavior going on at Augustine Lawrence's estate don't carry a magnetic weight all on their own. The author manages to give equal attention to Jane's emotional state, as well as her keen insight and willingness to investigate the strange goings-on at Lindridge Hall, despite Augustine's stern warnings not to ever step foot in his home. I will say that Jane is a very forgiving and patient woman, she tolerates far more than I would have, which honestly, is part of *The Death of Jane Lawrence*'s charm … and how it got its title.

CREATURES OF WILL AND TEMPER



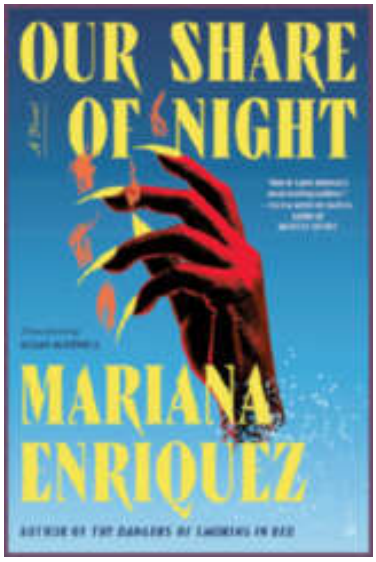
Molly Tanzer
WILLIAM MORROW | 2017 | 368 PAGES

A Gothic, supernatural fantasy retelling of The Picture of Dorian Gray, *this story features Evadne and her sister, Dorina, who could not be more different. Evadne is skilled in fencing and prefers the company of men, while Dorina spends all of her time with other women and is known as a flirtatious social butterfly. They're in London at the home of their uncle, Basil, and his enigmatic friend, Lady Henry. As the two sisters immerse themselves in London culture and city life, they somehow find themselves entangled in a circle of diabolists, demonology, and swordplay.*

My Thoughts: I listened to the audiobook and lived my best life while utterly absorbed in the Victorian-era atmosphere. The beautiful accents and London setting are perfectly enhanced by the narrator. The author shows off her knack for witty banter between a cast of quirky, queer, and fully realized characters. Lady Henry, without a doubt, would be played by Tilda Swinton in the movie adaptation. Her "love-at-first-sight" romance with Dorina was one of my favorite parts of this intricately plotted story. The fact that readers are helplessly invested and fall deeply in love with everyone elevates this from a dark fantasy to high-stakes Gothic horror, in my

opinion. I highly recommend the audiobook to have the same experience.

Our Share of Night

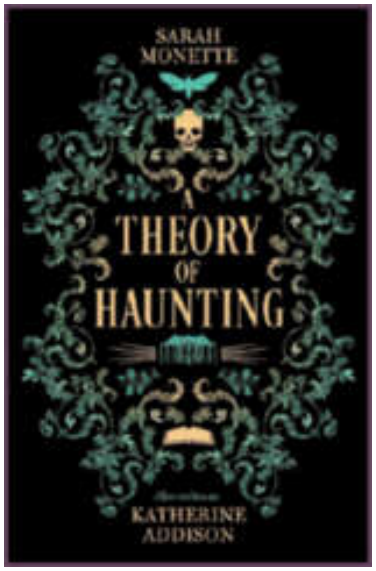


Mariana Enríquez (2019) translated by Megan McDowell
HOGARTH | 2023 | 608 PAGES

Juan is a powerful medium for a secret society called the Order. Juan's son, Gaspar, is next in line to be trained by the Order in the same way that Juan was, but Juan will do anything to keep Gaspar and his untapped powers from falling into the Order's hands.

My Thoughts: This epic, sprawling, Gothic family saga is told through multiple points of view and spans across decades. Readers are fully immersed in this world belonging to the Order, a terrifying, gruesome secret society capable of unimaginable inhumanity, all for the furthering of their own growing powers. But at the center of this larger-than-life tale is an intimately captured coming-of-age story that worms into your heart and makes you fall utterly in love with Gaspar. Truly an unforgettable masterpiece.

A Theory of Haunting



Sarah Monette
REBELLION PUBLISHING | 2023 | 146 PAGES

An archivist, Kyle Murchison Booth, has been summoned by the museum he works for to investigate the leader of an esoteric order who has a powerful influence over the daughter of the museum's founder. He's sent to the infamous Thirdhop Scarp estate to catalog the extensive home library and observe the activities of the occult practices going on in the home. Despite his best efforts, he's drawn into some unsettling situations.

My Thoughts: Sarah Monette proves how so much story can be packed into less than one hundred and fifty pages. A complete tale filled with everything Gothic horror lovers show up for. It's character-driven; I couldn't help but invest in the affairs of Kyle Murchison Booth and my heart leapt with joy to learn he has other adventures (so make sure to check out the rest of the series). Thirdhop Scarp is a dreadful place. I enjoyed the tale of its sinister history and the gruesome events that happened within its walls. Mr.

Booth meets a host of vibrant characters; any one of them capable of anything, so it was exhilarating to see what challenges awaited our clever and capable protagonist.

An Escape to a Beautiful Estate with Unexpected Darkness

Don’t you just hate it when you plan a getaway to a beautiful vacation destination, or you discover that you are the last known heir to your ancestral estate in some remote, exotic location, only to

arrive and discover a dark, evil entity has possessed the home? Or family secrets suddenly find their way to the surface? Or the estate's dark past is threatening to destroy you? It's really such a disappointment, but at least for readers joining you on this journey into tragedy, it's the perfect entertainment. In this list you can expect to find books that utilize these tropes in unique and fascinating ways.

> **Book Vibrations:** *a getaway from a busy life, change of atmosphere, exploring an idyllic setting, family dysfunction, fixer-upper, haunted, inheritance, suspense, "too good to be true," vacation homes & villas*

Diavola

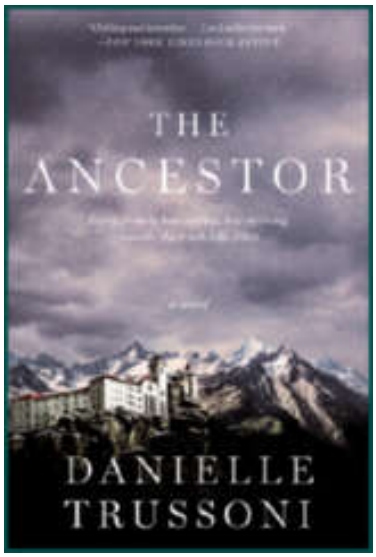
Jennifer Thorne
TOR NIGHTFIRE | 2024 | 304 PAGES

Anna, the black sheep of the family, reluctantly goes on a family vacation to Italy where everyone is staying in the same villa. After a few

days, the whole family is sure they are not alone in the house. Instead of coming together to solve this mystery, tensions mount.

My Thoughts: As far as haunted house stories go, I think this book adds something unique to the subgenre in terms of how in-depth it goes with the family issues. The complicated relationships add a layer of frustration and anxiety assisting in an increase in risk and doubling down on spooky vibes. There were never any lulls in the story—just a perfectly paced tale of one woman's struggle to convince her distrustful family they should flee from this beautiful house they spent so much money on … you can imagine how that's going to go.

The Ancestor



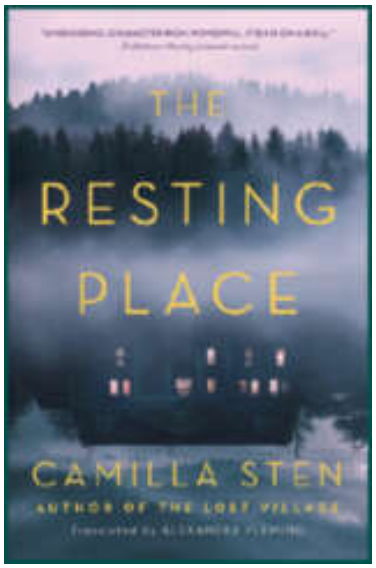
Danielle Trussoni
WILLIAM MORROW | 2020 | 368 PAGES

Alberta Montebianco lives a stressful, emotionally complicated lifestyle in New York. With almost magical timing, a letter shows up addressed to her but with a new title in front of her name: "Countess." As it turns out,

Alberta discovers that she is possibly the sole living heir to a noble title and a castle in Turin, Italy. As she adjusts to her new lifestyle, Alberta begins uncovering clues that hint at an unexpected family secret of epic proportions that will change the course of Alberta's life forever.

My Thoughts: I want a life-changing letter that tells me I am the last living heir to a castle in Italy. I want to inherit family heirlooms, crystal chandeliers, and a fully stocked library in a turret. I could do without the secret rooms and mysterious ancestors though. Also, the way this fairy tale descends into a nightmare is something I only want to experience in the comfort of my own home on a perfectly rainy day with a cup of Earl Grey.

The Resting Place



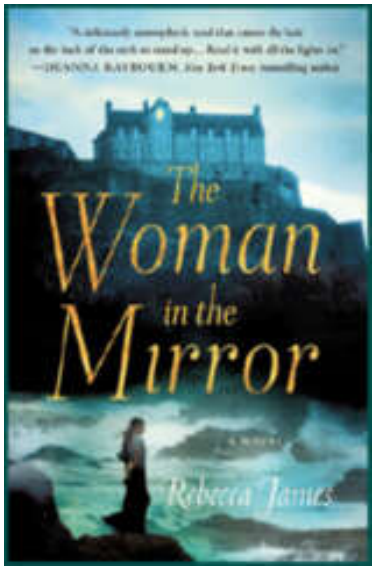
Camilla Sten (2020) translated by Alexandra Fleming
MINOTAUR | 2022 | 336 PAGES

Eleanor, a young woman, who suffers from prosopagnosia—a condition that renders her unable to recognize faces—is a key witness in the murder of her grandmother but is unable to recall the face of the killer.

After her grandmother's sudden death, she learns that she has inherited an estate in rural Switzerland. Joined by a small group of people close to her, they travel to the estate to unravel the murder mystery and work through the complicated relational issues Eleanor had with her emotionally unavailable, and sometimes even cruel, grandmother.

My Thoughts: The nature of the protagonist's unique condition adds to the layers of unease and suspense woven throughout this Gothic thriller. Camilla Sten uses classic tropes of inheritance, family trauma, isolation, and psychological horror to draw the reader in close for familiar Gothic vibes while simultaneously utilizing her knack for intricately plotting a complex thriller that keeps you guessing the whole time. The atmosphere of the setting is properly eerie, lending itself to the chilling dark secrets being unearthed within its walls.

THE WOMAN IN THE MIRROR

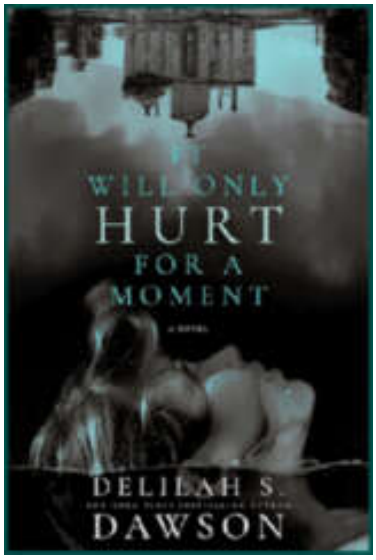


Rebecca James
MINOTAUR BOOKS | 2021 | 368 PAGES

Dual timelines tell the story of events that take place at Winterbourne Hall, Polcreath, Cornwall in 1947 and 2016. In 1947, a woman takes a nanny position to care for twins who live by the sea at Winterbourne Hall owned by Captain Grey, a disfigured, mysterious widower. In 2016, a woman receives a letter stating her relationship to the Grey family and claiming that she is the ancestral heir to the estate.

My Thoughts: This book feels like the author peeked inside my head to see which Gothic tropes I like best so that she could write a book with every single one of them included. I never wanted this to end. Both timelines capture the essence of feminist Gothic storytelling perfectly. There are echoes of *Jane Eyre, Rebecca,* and *The Turn of the Screw* here, as well as themes of patriarchy, feminine "hysteria," and flipping the script on the gold-digging trope. Not only does this book deliver on atmosphere, but the romantic elements are also extremely well crafted through solid character development and dynamic chemistry. I am convinced Rebecca James wrote this book just for me.

IT WILL ONLY HURT FOR A MOMENT



Delilah S. Dawson
DEL REY | 2024 | 368 PAGES

A woman is fleeing an oppressive and abusive relationship by hiding out, off the grid, at an artist's retreat held at a repurposed property. Guests stay in private assigned cottages and are outfitted with an art studio. The idea is to enjoy uninterrupted artistic expressions. Unfortunately, Sarah must deal with multiple unexpected distractions and mishaps. The grounds hold many secrets and not all of them stay buried.

My Thoughts: I like to imagine this author also set out to write a book that includes a checklist of tropes and vibes that I specifically enjoy and made sure this book crossed everything off the list: It's set on a large piece of property that guests can explore at their leisure (check). There is a crumbling resort that looks haunted and is off-limits (check). The main character is on a journey of self-discovery and personal healing after making herself a priority (check). There is a murder mystery, women fighting against the patriarchy, unlikely friendships, a romance, and ghosts (check, check, check, check, and check). All the checkmarks!

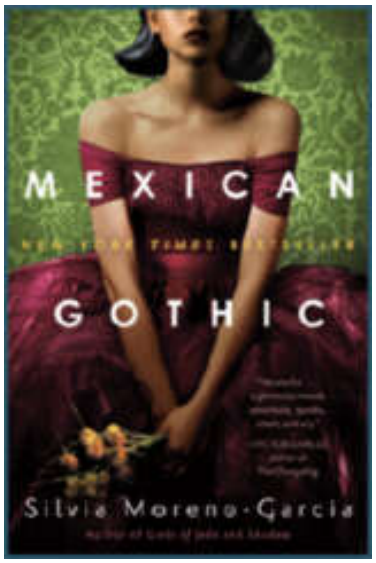
Gótico Familia

Here's a look at traditional, European Gothic themes and tropes captured by new voices twisting the narrative to highlight the truths of colonization, sexism, classism, racism, and the patriarchy. I used to think Gothic lit wasn't scary enough to be considered horror. I had an outdated stereotype in my mind of book covers with scared

women running from a dark castle in danger of falling off some seaside cliff or getting lost in the woods. Now, after reading Gothic horror by women from a variety of different countries and cultures, I have a fuller, bigger picture of how classic Gothic themes and tropes can be used by modern authors to explore important issues. This list features books that vibrate on the same wavelength of family ties, generational secrets and legacy, with a kiss of supernatural and paranormal elements.

Book Vibrations: *classism, cursed families, feminism, ghosts, haunted houses, historical, religious elements, romance, secrets & lies, traditions, witchcraft*

Mexican Gothic

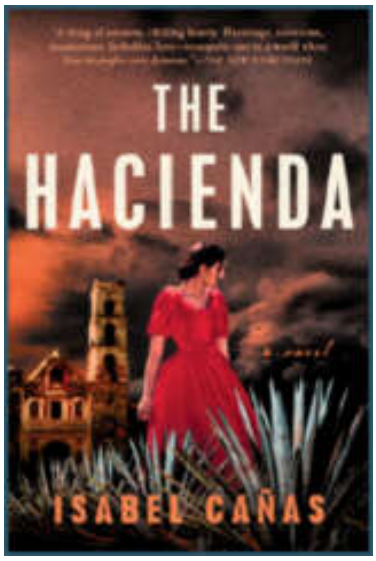


Silvia Moreno-Garcia
DEL REY | 2020 | 320 PAGES

This story takes place in El Triunfo, inspired by Mineral del Monte, a silver mining town in central Mexico. The protagonist, a young woman named Noemí, is a socialite on the verge of making major life decisions, resisting the expectation to marry and start a family. She receives an urgent and troubling letter from her cousin who is newly married and living in isolation somewhere in rural Mexico. Noemí goes to the mysterious family's estate, High Place, to check in on her cousin and make sure the family she has married into isn't up to something sinister.

My Thoughts: Spoiler alert, they are. But that is why *Mexican Gothic* is a historical, feminist horror novel. This is the book that rekindled my passion for Gothic horror. I read *Rebecca* in eighth grade, fell in love with the vibes, read a bunch more like it, read Stephen King's *Salem's Lot* and got stuck in adult horror novels for the next three decades, only rediscovering Gothic fiction in 2020. So, I credit Silvia Moreno-Garcia and her fierce love letter to Perkins' "The Yellow Wallpaper" for this resurgence of Gothic in my life. *Mexican Gothic* was a flawless experience for me. Noemí is at the top of my list of badass women protagonists smashing the patriarchy and reclaiming stereotypes about women in horror.

The Hacienda



Isabel Cañas
BERKLEY | 2022 | 352 PAGES

A historical Gothic haunted house tale with a love story nestled in its core, The Hacienda *features Beatriz, a fierce, wildly independent woman with ambition who sets her sights well above her lowly station. Beatriz and her mother are forced to move in with a relative after her father dies in Mexico's War of Independence. One night, she meets a wealthy widower and immediately decides that he is her ticket out of their dire situation. They marry and she is whisked off to the estate of her dreams. The reality of her new life becomes uncertain as soon as she arrives at Hacienda San Isidro and realizes her new husband is keeping secrets, and her new home is haunted.*

My Thoughts: *The Hacienda* was my favorite book the year it released and remains on my list of perfect reading experiences. The blend of historical, Gothic, romance, and ghost vibes are so seductively harmonious. Not too much or too little of any one thing. I wanted to live in this story. When it was over, I felt a hollow pit in my stomach, which was just my reader's heart letting my body know that spooky Gothic romances needed to have a permanent place on the book menu.

WOODWORM

Layla Martínez (2021) translated by Sophie Hughes and Annie McDermott
TWO LINES PRESS | 2024 | 144 PAGES

A haunting tale, Woodworm *is about generations of cursed women bound by the geography of this cursed house built by a man trapped forever in its walls. The haunted house is a metaphor for women surviving gender violence and repression by the patriarchal system in place. But this isn't a story about victimhood; it's a story of survival and revenge.*

My Thoughts: In this haunted house book, the women misunderstand the intentions of the ghosts. Eventually, it is clear all they want is to be seen—to get some form of justice for their powerlessness and oppression. Modern women going through trauma, they are joined by generations of women who went through the same trauma. It's such a vibrant expression of culture and history told through the lens of horror storytelling. Martínez has an intimate voice that feels familiar to me, like a friend telling me her

favorite ghost story. I felt lonely after reading the last page, like the friend I had just met through this book was leaving. I hope she writes more stories for us so I can visit with her again.

Before the Devil Knows You're Here

Autumn Krause
PEACHTREE TEEN | 2023 | 240 PAGES

A surrealist folk horror story set in the 1800s, Before the Devil Knows You're Here *is about a young woman named Catalina, who lives with her small family in a cabin at the edge of the woods. When her father dies suddenly, a strange figure, the Man of Sap, kidnaps her brother and leaves a bird in his place. The exchange prompts Catalina to embark on a quest where she meets Paul, a lumberjack who is also looking for the Man of Sap. They journey together. Meanwhile, in a separate timeline, we read about a man determined to nurture an old apple orchard into a bounty of apples for his new bride.*

My Thoughts: Classic American folklore characters, Johnny Appleseed and Paul Bunyan, as well as Mexican folk legends and

monsters, are infused into this dark, Gothic fable. Hopefully you have picked up on what I'm laying down here in terms of what kind of vibes to expect diving into this book, but let me repeat a few key words: FOLK. FABLE. GOTHIC. I'll also add FAIRY TALE. Everything you love about all four of those genres—dark magic, heritage, mythical beings, romance, Faustian bargains, and sympathetic villains as monsters—all layered into one tall tale with a sharp, capable woman protagonist. This book gave me *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006) vibes big time. I know for the right reader, that's all I need to say. For those who have not experienced that movie, set my book down and do so now, and then read this recommendation and fall in love with twisted folky fairy tales for the rest of your life. Then you'll know why I loved this book.

Know Thy Tropes

These themes are well established, widely accessible, and not unique to me. I didn't invent them. It's also not an exhaustive list; I'm sure there are much more nuanced lists out there for you should you decide to do a deeper dive, but this should get you started!

BASIC SURVIVAL: When survival is at stake, people discover the limits of their ability to stay alive. Example: *KINDRED* by Octavia Butler

CIRCLE OF LIFE: The beautiful and strange loop of birth, survival (life), and death. Example: *AND THEN SHE FELL* by Alicia Elliott

COMING OF AGE: The growth of a protagonist from childhood to adulthood; transitioning. Example: *CHLORINE* by Jade Song

FAITH VS. DOUBT: This isn't just in the context of spirituality, but can also manifest as faith/doubt in marriage, in oneself, career, etc. A crisis of faith is a major theme in horror. Example: *BAD CREE* by Jessica Johns

FAMILY: So many horror books introduce conflict through family. Issues of loyalty, inherited or generational trauma/curses, secrets and lies, betrayal, chosen family, etc. Example: *MEXICAN GOTHIC* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia

FATE VS. FREE WILL: Free will is the idea that everything you do is of your own volition: There is no external force guiding your hand. Destiny is the opposite: Your actions and thoughts are all preordained; there is no choice. Example: *WHERE I END* by Sophie White

GOOD VS. EVIL: "Good" is what we think of as morally right and desirable by a generally accepted standard, and "Evil" is profoundly immoral, wicked, and undesirable by that same standard. Protagonists and antagonists locked in a battle where the reader very clearly wants or needs good to triumph over evil. Example: *THE REFORMATORY* by Tananarive Due

HUBRIS: This describes a personality quality of extreme or excessive pride or dangerous overconfidence and complacency, often in combination with (or synonymous with) arrogance. Hubris can be something a character feels internally, but it usually translates to the character's actions. Example: *GOOD NEIGHBORS* by Sarah Langan

IDENTITY: Characters questioning who they are and where they belong. Example: *OUR SHARE OF NIGHT* by Mariana Enríquez

LONELINESS: People unable to build relationships with others experience this. Their state of mind always comes with sadness and low self-esteem, causing profound emotional suffering. Example: Mary Shelley's *FRANKENSTEIN*

MADNESS: A delusional and dangerous frame of mind. Example: *MAEVE FLY* by CJ Leede

MANKIND VS. NATURE: Our natural inclination is to dominate the land, but nature has its own means of survival. Example: *THIS WRETCHED VALLEY* by Jenny Kiefer

MANKIND VS. SELF: Sometimes the protagonist is their own adversary. To overcome certain challenges, the protagonist must first overcome their internal conflicts. Example: *STRANGE SALLY DIAMOND* by Liz Nugent

MANKIND VS. SOCIETY: A story in which an individual (or a small group of individuals) chooses to or is forced to fight against their

society or community. Example: *THE YEAR OF THE WITCHING* by Alexis Henderson

POETIC JUSTICE: This is a literary device in which evil characters are punished or brought to justice for their actions, and good characters are rewarded. Example: *DIRTY LAUNDRY* by Disha Bose

POWER & CORRUPTION: Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. This theme is often closely related to "Humankind vs. Society." Example: *THE HANDMAID'S TALE* by Margaret Atwood

PURSUIT OF LOVE: Love makes the world go round, but it's not always easy to find. Whether it's romantic, familial, or platonic love, there's much to be said about love's pursuit—and the conflict that comes from pursuing it. Example: *VAMPIRES OF EL NORTE* by Isabel Cañas

REVENGE: The protagonist believes they have been wronged and they set out to retaliate against those who have wronged them. Example: *THE FAVORITES* by Rosemary Hennigan (I loved the audiobook!)

WAR: Mankind has been at war with itself since the dawn of civilization.

Example: *THE FERVOR* by Alma Katsu

The Tropiest Gothic Horror Trope Ever

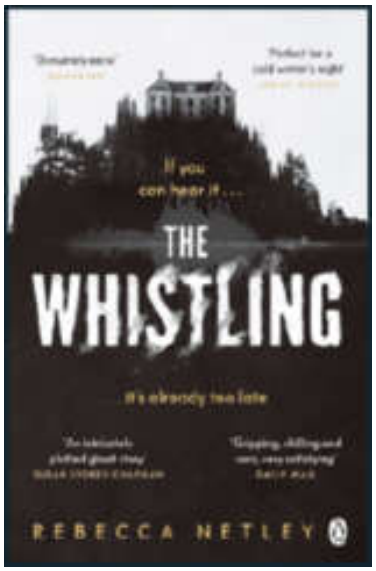
There are three common tropes in Gothic horror that I can read repeatedly and never grow tired of:

1. A young woman shows up at an enormous estate to be the new nanny. Of course, the children are creepy or weird and the parent who hired the nanny is mysterious. Something secretive is happening at the estate, nobody can or will talk about what happened to the previous nanny, and there are probably ghosts.
2. A woman who is down on her luck gets a letter stating that she is the last known heir to inherit a dilapidated ancestral home in another country.
3. A woman finds herself in an isolated location with a murder mystery to solve and gets way in over her head—it's so classically Gothic!

This list is comprised of my favorite books making the best use of these cherished tropes that send me straight into my happiest, most blissful reading experiences.

Book Vibrations: *buried secrets, creepy kids, death & dying, decaying mansions, family curses, fog-shrouded landscapes, ghosts, grief, isolation, madness, murder mysteries, paranormal & supernatural activities, private islands or remote villages, spooky graveyards, tormented estate staff, widows or widowers*

The Whistling

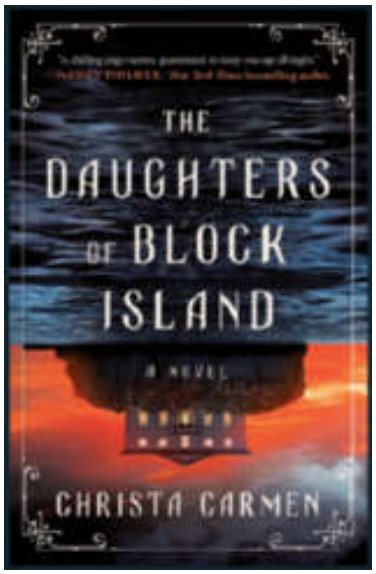


Rebecca Netley
PENGUIN BOOKS LTD | 2022 | 384 PAGES

A young woman named Elspeth accepts a nanny position at an estate on a small Scottish island. Upon her arrival, she learns the child in her care is mute due to the traumatic and sudden death of her brother. The staff at the estate are quite tight-lipped about the incident. The deeper Elspeth digs into this mystery, the more elusive the answers become.

My Thoughts: If ever there was a perfect book for a rainy day and a steaming mug of tea, this is it. Some Gothic horror stories unfurl slowly, but *The Whistling* glides at a good pace—somewhere between a murder-mystery thriller and a ghost story. The perpetually wet, dreary landscape and isolated setting is perfect for capturing those bone-chilling vibes. And this book earns bonus points for "creepy kids" and a cast of mysterious strangers.

The Daughters of Block Island



Christa Carmen
THOMAS & MERCER | 2023 | 332 PAGES

Two sisters are determined to uncover the secrets of their family history. Blake is the first to take a stab at the investigation, but she is found murdered in the bathtub at White Hall. Before she died, she sent a letter to her estranged sister, Thalia, asking her to join her. Thalia picks up where her sister left off, even staying in the same room at White Hall.

"I feel like this house, this mansion, knows why I've come here. It feels, I don't know, foreboding. Like it's enlisted even the weather to conspire against me."

My Thoughts: Instead of these expected themes and tropes feeling too "on the nose," the author addresses them head-on as a love letter to all the Gothic horror mysteries to come before it. It was fun to follow the women during their amateur sleuthing on the island with full awareness of their Gothic heroine status. The expected vibes and aesthetics are expertly infused with some modern elements. I particularly enjoyed the Thelma & Louise style sleuthing. I could see this as a continued series with more murder mysteries on Block Island.

The Secrets of Hartwood Hall

Katie Lumsden
DUTTON | 2023 | 352 PAGES

A woman named Margaret shows up to an isolated estate, Hartwood Hall, with a whole wing closed off and a small staff of servants who seem very suspicious and tight-lipped about everything. Margaret has some secrets of her own that she's built a wall around, keeping her heart guarded, but thinks about all the time—so she's a haunted, tortured soul living in a new place with a new job and everyone around her seems like they're keeping secrets too.

My Thoughts: Peak Gothic vibes, a romance, and light spooky elements create the perfect atmosphere for readers who show up for this exact thing. The author does an excellent job of unraveling certain secrets and mysteries slowly. Some of the bigger reveals toward the end were delicious surprises that I did not see coming. I was a little suspicious of one thing, but didn't fully guess the outcome so that was exciting. I wanted to listen to the audiobook for this one, but I read several chapters and got reeled into an

emotional investment quickly, so I ended up staying locked into my physical copy. I do recommend the audiobook though; the narrator's voice is perfectly cozy.

Grey Dog

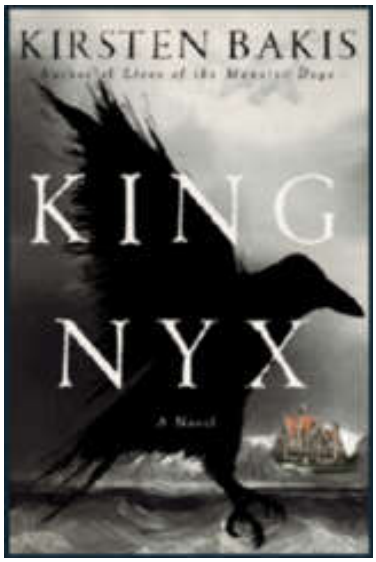
Elliott Gish
ECW PRESS | 2024 | 400 PAGES

A woman accepts a teaching position at a one-room school-house in a rural small town. With the story set in the early 1900s, the fact that Ada Byrd is unwed at her age means she is technically a spinster. She is offered room and board with a local family, the same place where the prior schoolteacher stayed. Some of the townspeople and her surroundings are very unusual; she finds herself investigating their odd behavior and recording her observations.

My Thoughts: Ada's story is told through her diary entries as she reflects on the day's activities. Her worldview is insightful and imaginative—she often finds herself fantasizing about people in a way that tantalizes the reader but doesn't necessarily capture the

truth, which is fun. As the days go by, Ada's entries sound more and more fantastic, and it's up to the reader to separate truth from the perceptions of a young woman who sees the world a certain way. A clever way to unfurl a supernatural mystery slowly and skillfully.

King Nyx



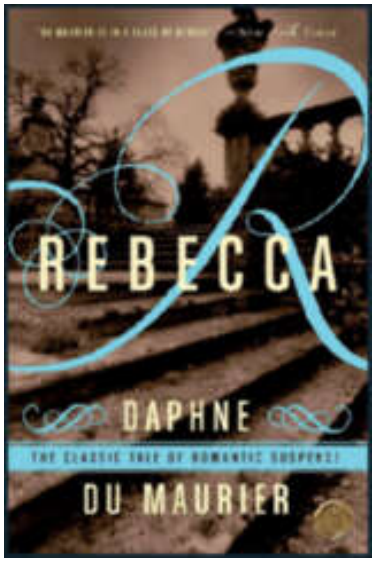
Kirsten Bakis
LIVERIGHT | 2024 | 320 PAGES

An eccentric millionaire summons Anna Fort's husband to his private estate on a remote island. Things are mysterious the moment they arrive. The driver that picks them up is odd. They must quarantine for a few weeks in a little cabin next door to another couple in the same situation. As time passes, things get more and more alarming. Anna befriends the wife of the couple next door, Stella, and they begin exploring the island together.

"More lives are derailed by men who did whatever they wanted. The same story over and over again."

My Thoughts: I love how feminist this Gothic horror/mystery is right from the beginning: Men are ambitiously pursuing their interests and advancing their positions, while the women in their lives are simply expected to support them. The two women in this story, Anna and Stella, play along to get along, but being trapped together on this mysterious island gives them ample opportunities to get up to their own affairs. Wildly entertaining and eerie, sometimes it even surprised me, and I gasped out loud. *King Nyx* is full of quirky, unexpected story beats.

REBECCA



Daphne du Maurier
VICTOR GOLLANCZ LTD | 1938 | 449 PAGES

A widower, Maximilian de Winter, sweeps a young lady off her feet. They skip the traditional engagement and head straight into marriage. The young woman narrates her experience as the new mistress of the infamous seaside estate, Manderley.

My Thoughts: This book has everything going for it—a naive, young woman up against impossible odds stacked against her. Readers bear witness to the mounting anxiety and duress as our heroine tries so hard to maintain a positive attitude. She wanders the halls of her new isolated home in the constant shadow of her much older husband's dead wife, Rebecca. Nobody will let her forget about this woman, especially the estate's main housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers—the most insidious, Gothic antagonist in history. Not many classics hold up as well as *Rebecca.* It never loses its appeal.

The Mothers of the Gothic and the Macabre

I am slowly but steadily making my way through this series of 16 books available on hoopla: our founding ***Mothers of the Macabre.*** I see this list as a challenge to bolster my understanding of Gothic themes and tropes from the original authors who created them. I figure others might want to join me, considering the wealth of modern Gothic horror we have available to us every year. It's a hot trend in fiction that I hope continues to see a steady uptick.

I've read *Ethan Frome* and *Maria* and currently have *The Mysteries of Udolpho* on my short list of thick books to tackle. I have included brief descriptions for each list as listed on hoopla.

The Old Manor House by Charlotte Smith	"Forbidden love against the backdrop of the French Revolution."
The Castle of Wolfenbach by Eliza Parsons	"Matilda runs from an abusive uncle and finds refuge in a creepy castle where she uncovers a plethora of dangerous situations."
A Sicilian Romance by Ann Radcliffe	"Julia fights for her autonomy and freedom from her family's secrets and lies."
The Mysteries of Udolpho by Ann Radcliffe	"This book is considered the archetypal Gothic novel." It's 650 pages! But it does seem to be the foundation for Gothic tropes to come as it features a young girl orphaned after the death of her

	parents and sent to live with her emotionally detached Aunt in a crumbling castle.
Glenarvon by Caroline Lamb	“This story caused quite a controversy within high society, with Queen Victoria even requesting a copy!”
Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman by Mary Wollstonecraft	“Imprisoned in an insane asylum by her own husband, Maria seeks justice in a patriarchal system of oppression.” And sidenote here, I had no idea Mary Wollstonecraft is Mary Shelley’s mother and that she died eleven days after giving birth.
The Midnight Inkwell by various authors	“Thirteen short stories by women pioneers of Gothic horror.”
Ethan Frome by Edith Wharton	“A worn-down farmer trapped by duty and a loveless marriage sees an unexpected turn in his life when his wife’s cousin shows up.”
Elsie’s Lonely Afternoon by Marjorie Bowen	“The sad little life of Elsie, an orphan, neglected and living alone in a grand house with only a bedridden grandma.”
East Lynne by Ellen Wood	“A tangled web of infidelity, betrayal, and misunderstandings.”
The Romance of the Forest by Ann Radcliffe	“Romance, mystery, and suspense in the French countryside.”
The Children of the Abbey by Regina Maria Roche	“Young orphans are cheated out of their inheritance and locked away in an abbey. They discover dark secrets within their confining walls.”

The Orphan of the Rhine by Eleanor Sleath	“Refusing several marriage proposals, Julie fights to be the master of her own destiny.”
The Old English Baron by Clara Reeve	“Medieval England is the backdrop for this Gothic horror.”
The Sorrows of Satan by Marie Corelli	“A Faustian bargain exploring the depths of human desire and a battle of good and evil.”
Emmeline: The Orphan of the Castle by Charlotte Smith	“A classically feminist Gothic novel about a woman with no social station trying to make a reasonable life for herself.”

If These Walls Could Talk

This reading list came together so quickly in my head. I started thinking about books similar to “The Yellow Wallpaper”—women in a distressing mental or physical (or both) crisis where their partners are not committed to trusting a woman to have agency over her own well-being; the man always thinks he knows best. In some

cases, the house (manor, estate) is an active participant in dragging the woman down further into despair or madness—almost as if the man and the walls in which the woman is contained work together to imprison the woman both physically and mentally. Truly horrific!

Book Vibrations: *big estates, classism, control/dominance, delusions, dual narratives (past & present), gender roles, Gothic, guilt/shame, historical, isolation, marriage, mental illness, multiple POVs, murder & mystery, new homes, pregnancy, rural settings, secrets*

A Good House for Children

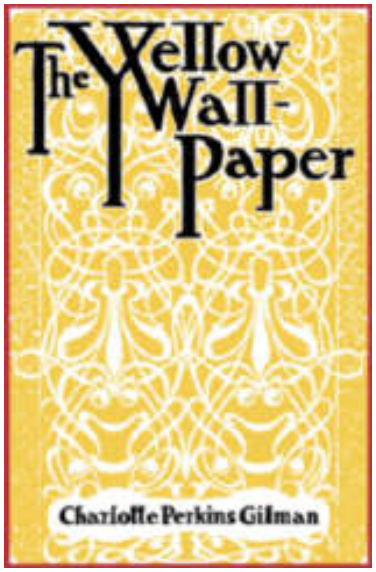
Kate Collins
MARINER BOOKS | 2023 | 336 PAGES

Dual timelines tell the stories of two different women who find themselves living in a uniquely designed mansion called The Reeve. Orla and Nick move into The Reeve in 2017 after Nick decides it will be good for their

children. He works away from home during the week, leaving Orla with their two young children alone until the weekend. In 1976, Lydia is a live-in nanny, caring for the children of a recently widowed woman who works from home. Both Orla and Lydia become increasingly more unsettled in the house the longer they live there.

My Thoughts: Further proof that Gothic horror can manage a slow-burn, moody pace while also being mind-numbingly terrifying. I listened to the audiobook and all I wanted to do was live for this story. I was fully immersed in the atmosphere and invested in Orla and Lydia's experiences at The Reeve. Some haunted house tales feel like the spectral presence of the dead is the scariest thing about it while others make it quite clear that the house itself is an evil entity. This book had my heart pounding with anxiety. With strong feminist themes of motherhood, female agency, parenting, marriage, identity, and protecting the ones you love at all costs—even against the forces of unexplainable evil when nobody else will believe you—this book is a new favorite for me.

The Yellow Wallpaper

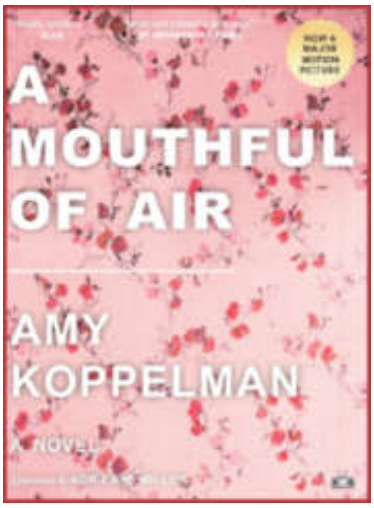


Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1892)
FEMINIST PRESS | 1973 | 63 PAGES

A woman gives birth to a healthy child but doesn't quite feel like herself. Much to her husband's frustration, she cannot get well. In fact, he doubts there is anything wrong with her at all. They decide to take up residence at a huge estate for the summer. She thinks it's likely haunted; he laughs at her—she is so silly. She hates the wallpaper in one of the rooms and spends hours looking at strange images in the pattern. Instead of feeling rested and cared for in this strange house, she has never felt so alone.

My Thoughts: Ever since I read this short story, I have found scraps of "The Yellow Wallpaper" in hundreds of stories. Bits and pieces of husbands not believing their wives and women who feel isolated in rooms full of people. Yellow wallpaper with a pattern of madness and hysteria, delusions and visions. She's not ill. She doesn't see ghosts. The baby is ok. Her body is ok. She needs to stop overreacting. Stop being difficult. Stop inconveniencing the men in her life with her silly complaints and issues. And since this was written in the late 1800s, this is the point of origin. That hideous yellow wallpaper finds itself on the walls in all of the books on this list so I had to include it!

A Mouthful of Air

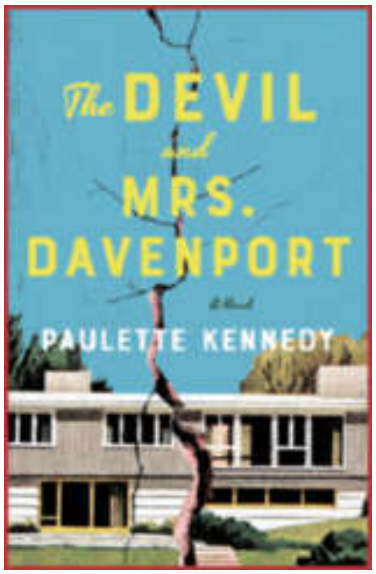


Amy Koppelman (2003)
TWO DOLLAR RADIO | 2021 | 174 PAGES

A woman is bravely navigating her way through life after an attempted suicide and extended stay in a clinic. As a mother and a wife, she struggles through the aftermath of her mental health crisis. This book is a deep dive into the psychological warfare happening inside one woman's mind.

My Thoughts: This book broke me into a million pieces. It's tough to sign up for a reading experience that you know is emotionally devastating, but I think this book is a real-life horror that so many women can relate to in some way or the other. I believe the author picks up where "The Yellow Wallpaper" and *The Bell Jar* leave off and adds to the tapestry of literature exploring the real darkness women face inside the confines of their own minds.

The Devil and Mrs. Davenport



Paulette Kennedy
LAKE UNION PUBLISHING | 2024 | 351 PAGES

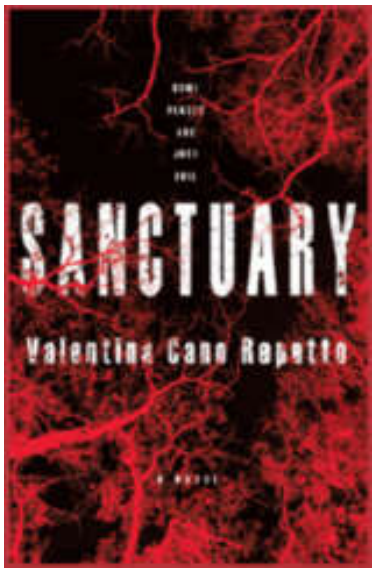
Missouri, 1955: Pete and Loretta live on the "respectable" side of a quaint town called Myrna Grove. Loretta aspired and dreamed for herself but sacrificed those goals to support Pete in his Christian ministry and education. He's a Bible professor at a local college. Loretta looks after the children and takes care of the house. When a young girl is murdered, Loretta starts having these sporadic, yet vivid visions. At first, she confides in Pete, but he is dismissive, chalking it up to hysteria and later accusing her of something demonic … so she starts hiding the phenomena from him, seeking help from a local parapsychologist.

(continued)

My Thoughts: This book is perfect for this list as it's a strong example of a story that zeroes in on what happens in a marriage behind closed doors. My favorite aspect of this book is Loretta. The formidable, resourceful, and relentless Mrs. Davenport. Despite all the odds stacked against her, Loretta always finds a way. Her inner strength of character is so appealing, I immediately invested in her emotionally. I couldn't read these pages fast enough. I had to know how Loretta was going to do what she felt she needed to do to stay

true to herself despite her overbearing husband working so hard against her, thwarting her efforts at every turn. And society favors the husband! It's so maddening to revisit the sexist, oppressive, post-World War II era of 1955 in Missouri. And you're probably asking, but is it scary? Why is it considered a Gothic horror story? Well, I'd like to keep my cards close to the vest on this one, but I will tease you with the promise of shocking escalation, dark secrets, and the very real threat of truly losing one's personal agency.

SANCTUARY



Valentina Cano Repetto
CAMCAT BOOKS | 2024 | 336 PAGES

Set in the 1930s, Sibilla and her husband, Giovanni, are expecting their first child. They move to an abandoned sawmill with the intention of restoring both the sawmill and the villa to their original glory. Sibilla's husband is boorish and misogynistic. The other timeline is a look back to the Renaissance, the 1600s. The sawmill is occupied by Maddalena, a strong, capable woman who is supported by a dutiful, faithful husband who adores her and encourages his wife to be the woman she is—an

herbalist (someone who communicates with plants and practices alchemy, cartomancy, and herbalism). The townspeople think she's a witch, blasphemous against their god … a "Strega."

My Thoughts: Sibilla's storyline feels like classic "The Yellow Wallpaper" or *Rebecca* kind of Gothic with a *Downton Abbey*-style dynamic between Sibilla and her new live-in housekeeper. In both timelines, there are sabotaging acts against the villa and the sawmill to chase them off the land; the only real difference is in how each family handles the chaos and violence.

I enjoyed both narratives and equally looked forward to the events in each as they were unfolding. I especially loved the contrast between the two women and the way they are treated by their husbands. A supportive, loving husband who treats his wife as an equal frees her up to live in her truth as a whole woman—capable and decisive—respected in her community. Women who are treated as less than, frail, and incapable of sound judgment are bound to live in bondage—fearful, doubtful, and paranoid. The contrast between Sibilla and Maddalena was fascinating.

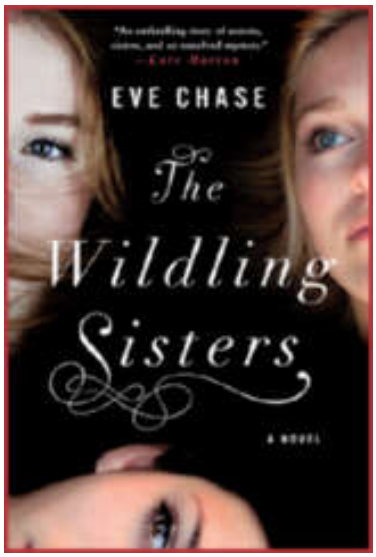
GHOST MOTHER

Kelly Dwyer
UNION SQUARE & CO | 2024 | 336 PAGES

A husband and wife who are clearly in no financial position to take on a "money pit," purchase a dilapidated estate in Wisconsin known to the locals as the "murder house." Aside from the financial trouble, things are a little strained between the couple, but Lily Bly (nods to The Haunting of Bly Manor *anyone?) promises to get a job instead of wistfully dreaming of babies and decorating a nursery. She gets a job at the library as an assistant (she's terrible at it) and becomes obsessed with the murder mystery surrounding The Lawrence Estate.*

My Thoughts: As the story unravels, readers learn about the narrator and the house. It is an entire journey of collecting clues and information leading to the climax. The husband's job takes him away from the house, leaving his wife to deal with this huge estate in various stages of disrepair, not to mention, it's most likely haunted—so that's a real treat. I love to hate a condescending, gaslighting, and neglectful husband. But Lily is also very flawed. It's extremely entertaining to be a fly on the wall during the domestic turmoil and the increasingly hostile paranormal disturbances.

The Wildling Sisters



Eve Chase
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS | 2017 | 336 PAGES

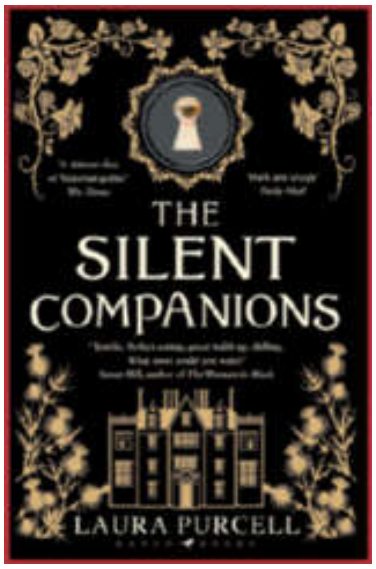
In the summer of 1959, four sisters spend the summer at Applecote Manor with the aunt and uncle who are still dealing with the disappearance of their daughter. The sisters are distracted by some local boys, except for fifteen-year-old Margot who is more preoccupied with their missing cousin, Audrey. The book also follows another timeline that is fifty years later, when a blended family moves in to make Applecote Manor their own but can't seem to come together.

"Houses are never just houses."

My Thoughts: Applecote Manor is familiar with loss and sorrow. Contained within its walls, a mother has cried in the bed of her missing daughter, a stepmother has voiced painful frustrations about her stepdaughter not letting her get close, and a daughter has written in her journal about missing her mother who passed away. All of these emotions are absorbed into the framework of the home and spilled like secrets to the reader in dual timelines. The present-day narrative is the painful observation of a newly formed family

that is unable to build trust in each other and headed for a crisis. The narrative from the past unravels a mystery involving the Wildling family's tragic loss of a young woman and her cousin's determination to investigate it further while she's visiting Applecote for the summer. I can remember my reading experience like it was yesterday: The apple-blossom-scented heatwave of the 1950s and the cold wintertime isolation of the present linger well after the mystery is solved.

The Silent Companions



Laura Purcell
RAVEN BOOKS | 2017 | 384 PAGES

The Bridge is an estate in disrepair when Elsie arrives pregnant and newly widowed. A darkness permeates the halls and the house staff. When Elsie and Sarah explore, they stumble upon the silent companions, life-sized wooden cutouts made in their likeness. Are they multiplying? Where did they come from and why don't they stay in one place?

My Thoughts: I still remember how genuinely surprised I was at how scary this book is. I wasn't expecting a Gothic horror novel to go so hard in the painting. The mystery of the silent companions is slowly revealed as readers go back in time to the original story and learn the insidious history of The Bridge and its peculiar inhabitants. I did not read this book at night; I suggest this one as a perfectly safe daytime-only read. I would pick this book as the gold standard for Gothic horror. It's the bar by which all the rest are measured. I will forever chase the high of this reading experience—the dual vibes of peak Gothic atmosphere and storytelling infused with pure, unadulterated horror. A masterpiece.

DAMSELS AND DEMONS

By Laura Purcell

For some people, the words "Gothic horror" will always be synonymous with the image of a girl in a white night gown, clutching a candle as she runs across the moonlit grounds of a castle. And let's be honest, it's a great aesthetic. But can such a genre, which started out with twee ingénues as its heroines, really be a vehicle for feminist storytelling? I would argue yes. While beloved tropes like the Byronic villain remain, the Gothic has evolved and modernized to become the perfect metaphor for female struggles in society. In fact, the seeds were always there. Even the innocent heroine (or naïf) fleeing from her dark suitor makes the point that young women embark into a frightening world on the point of maturity—more frightening than their male relatives often realize—and they are forced to grow up twice as fast.

But what exactly *is* Gothic horror? As a literary genre, it's difficult to define—and that, in itself, is a Gothic characteristic. It deals with liminal spaces, the nonbinary, and shades of gray. In short, it makes you question rather than conform. Small wonder, then, that it has proved popular with a variety of marginalized groups—among them, women. And as with most things beloved by women, the Gothic has been the target of parody and dismissive comment. It's labelled as the kind of writing that prioritizes feelings over reason, encouraging melodrama and superstition. Critics use the same words that are levelled at women every day. Too emotional. Too sensitive. Calm down, dear.

Yet the genre persists, rejecting such minimization and subverting it. Here, at last, the things buried and repressed are given center stage —even a physical, albeit often ghostly, form. Readers have been known to find Gothic horror far more uncomfortable than its

explicit, gory siblings, for instead of making you gaze upon obvious terrors, it forces you to confront a mirror. All the elements of life you would rather hide from insist upon being heard. Perhaps, I might add, all the *people* society wishes to ignore also insist upon having their say.

I don't think it's a coincidence that much of the genre is set squarely in the home, a place traditionally considered a woman's domain. Sometimes a battleground, sometimes a prison, it's an area where much is suffered unseen, in silence. Female pain, with no other outlet, seems to have physically bled into the walls of these fictional houses. But there's also a strange, feminine power in the setting. After all, the mistress of the house understands it best. In this genre, her knowledge, or even intuition, rejected by others, tends to save her in the end.

This, I believe, is what gives Gothic horror such a distinctly feminist vibe. The woman's struggle is not only given a voice at last, but it actually *matters.* Of course she must fight, as always, to be believed. When the otherworldly forces close in, she is branded as crazy, dangerous, delusional—but she is right. From behind the tropes comes a female scream of rage. I told you so. Why didn't you listen to me?

It's cathartic. But beyond that immediate satisfaction, the genre also makes a compelling case against repression of any kind, a warning that if emotions are not heard and dealt with in a timely manner, they'll come back in a terrible form. We see this most often in the narratives dealing with witchcraft; women denied any agency for so long that when they finally seize power, they take it way too far. Eponymous "villains" such as Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* or Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* have been accused of demonizing women, but I refute this kind of reading. To me, they serve as new versions of Frankenstein's monster, pushed into a shape by the society, or man, who "made" them. They are a warning, a plea—and more

psychologically interesting as characters because of it. Like most things in this genre, they require more than just a surface reading.

Which brings me to one of my favorite parts of Gothic literature: its lingering sense of unease. Because we are forced to ask ourselves if the end of the story truly is the end. Astute readers will find themselves questioning whether Maxim de Winter should have been acquitted for murder, or if Jane Eyre ending up with Mr. Rochester really is the best thing for her. There's moral ambiguity, a sense of more work to be done, rather than everything tidied neatly away. We acknowledge that in this society, even a female character's "happily ever after" is fraught with problems. It's a surprising dose of realism in a space where ghosts and ghouls abound.

So while I completely understand the frustration readers might feel in seeing characters like *Dracula's* Lucy Westenra seemingly punished for her beauty and sexuality (the portrayal of women in *Dracula* has enough material for another essay), I would argue that the embers of feminism are often found simmering in the subtext of even the most antiquated Gothic horror. As we move into the modern era, strong female voices are filling the genre, turning it into one of defiance against a world of restricted imagination. Empathy and an open mind are being asserted as strengths, not weaknesses. We are putting a hand on the blade and turning it a hundred and eighty degrees. And if we want to do that wearing a frilly, ankle-length nightgown, surrounded by wilting black roses, that is completely our choice.

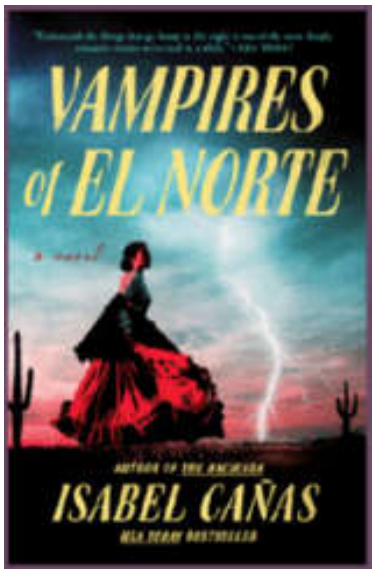
Laura Purcell is a former bookseller and the author of eight novels, including award-winners *The Silent Companions, The Shape of Darkness,* and *The Whispering Muse.* She worked as the lead writer on *Roanoke Falls*, a horror podcast executive produced by John Carpenter. Laura lives and works in the South East of England.

Horrormance

There's something so interesting about the way love and fear mingle. One moment, your heart thrums with desire; the next, it pounds with terror. These two emotions—so seemingly opposite—are, in truth, not so different. Both ignite something primal within us: One pulls us together; one pushes us apart. This list of books isn't just a collection of romances with a spooky twist or horror books with subtle longing. The combination of loving relationships and unadulterated horror drives the stakes up so high. The main characters have everything to lose. Star-crossed lovers battle an ancient power of darkness or a bloodsucking creature from beyond the grave. Maybe a woman is transforming into a monster right when she is rekindling a fire with an old flame. Or perhaps, two strangers meet for the first time and discover their magnetism during an effort to solve a murder mystery and survive the wrath of a vengeful paranormal entity. Whatever the circumstances are, one thing is the same: Two are better than one when it comes to facing evil.

Book Vibrations: *childhood friendships, complicated feelings, creatures, forbidden love, haunted past, high stakes, supernatural*

Vampires of El Norte

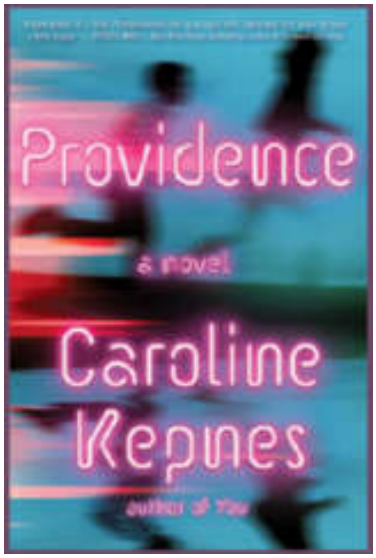


Isabel Cañas
BERKLEY | 2023 | 384 PAGES

Nena, a wealthy Mexican patrón's daughter, and Néstor, a peasant, are childhood sweethearts. Keeping their love a secret, they meet under the cover of darkness. One night, they are attacked by a bloodsucking monster. Unable to protect his love, Néstor leaves her lifeless body where she'll be found and flees his home. Ten years later Néstor is forced to return in battle to defend his homeland against Texas invaders. He is forced to encounter Nena who is a curandera healer for the Mexican military. Despite their complicated history, they must come together against human and supernatural monsters.

My Thoughts: I don't know what I loved more about this book: the author's chilling descriptions of vampiric primal bloodlust or the burning heat of Nena and Néstor's "will they or won't they" passion. I also enjoyed the historical setting in 1840s Mexico and the natural tensions that arise from the main characters' eventual involvement in multiple conflicts: the dual threat of supernatural and human monsters in the form of colonizers and vampires, as well as the relational conflicts between Nena and Néstor and their families. This hit on so many emotional needs! Gore and romance are the perfect combination.

PROVIDENCE



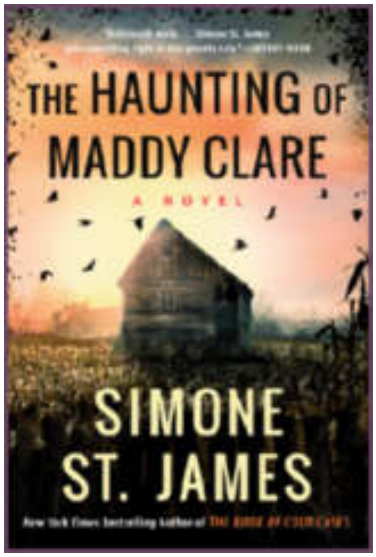
Caroline Kepnes
LENNY | 2018 | 384 PAGES

Providence *is a supernatural thriller about childhood best friends, Jon and Chloe, who are torn apart when Jon is kidnapped. Jon returns years later with a strange power to harm the ones he loves. Jon will do anything to protect Chloe; a detective will do anything to solve a series of murders connected to Jon's case; and Chloe must reconcile her new life with the one she could have had with Jon before he disappeared.*

My Thoughts: Caroline Kepnes has a supernatural ability of her own, a unique power to draw her readers into any story and keep them under her spell, turning pages, until the tale is told. Most Kepnes fans are all about her Joe Goldberg series (and with good reason!), but Jon and Chloe have a magnetic love story all their own. I think this book vibes so well with the others on this list. First, the Lovecraftian cosmic elements represent the devastation and lonely side of love and heartbreak. In this list, we have ghosts,

werewolves, and vampires, while *Providence* plumbs the depths of our human frailties; the way we recklessly fall in love with all these hopes and expectations knowing full well that we are not in control of our fates. This is such a unique book and perfect for readers who crave a situationship with horror while still keeping deep roots in other genres like sci-fi, romance, and mystery thriller.

The Haunting of Maddy Clare



Simone St. James
BERKLEY | 2012 | 336 PAGES

With the story set in the 1920s, Sarah Piper is sent by her temp agency to accompany a young man on a paranormal investigation in a small town. She really has no experience with this sort of thing, but short on funds and genuinely curious, Sarah accepts the position. Her new employer, Alistair Gellis, is ambitious, attractive, and available. But it's Gellis's partner Matthew Ryder, who joins the team later, that preoccupies Sarah's thoughts.

My Thoughts: *The Haunting of Maddy Clare* is the perfect blend of chilling paranormal activity, small town murder mystery, and steamy romance. I loved the 1920s aesthetic and character-driven storytelling. I would caution horror enthusiasts and mystery-thriller lovers to check their expectations and make sure they align with a cozier vibe and light mystery plotting. *The Haunting of Maddy Clare* focuses more on the character dynamics at play and gives less attention to the ghost and her story, but that isn't to say there isn't enough here to unsettle and disturb—there's just a little bit of everything and it's perfect reading for a rainy day and a hot mug of tea.

Such Sharp Teeth

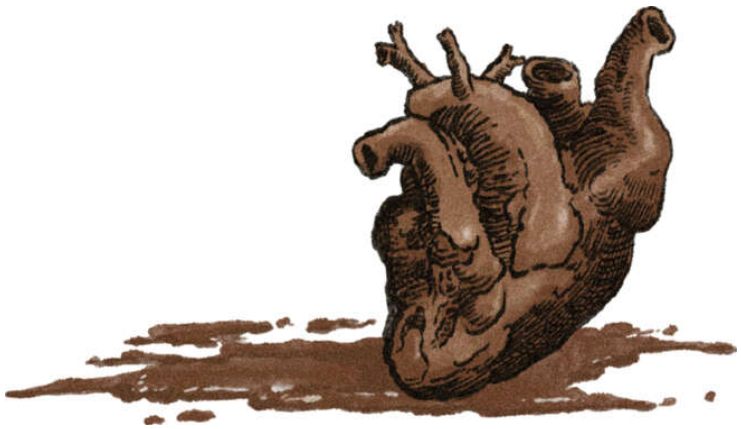
Rachel Harrison

BERKLEY | 2022 | 336 PAGES

Rory Morris reluctantly returns to her hometown to show up for her twin sister, Scarlett, who is pregnant and going through volatile relationship issues. Once she gets back, her old life assaults her senses—she finds

herself bumping into old flames carrying emotional baggage, picking up where she left off with family and friends she hasn't seen in years, along with the nostalgia and feelings that come with being home. One night, she hits an animal on a dark road, complicating everything even further.

My Thoughts: A classic werewolf story tucked inside a hometown drama, complete with a complicated romance, family secrets, and fiercely feminine themes of being a woman in this modern moment. I feel like it's safe to say horror readers gravitate to Harrison's particular brand of horror for light paranormal and supernatural activity with heavy feminine themes, character-driven storytelling, and complicated relational dynamics between the main characters—whether they are family or friends, someone is always working through trauma or toxicity, and it's fascinating for readers to wrestle through similar emotions in relatable circumstances while also enjoying dark, magical realism or horror/fantasy. I think all readers can relate to the situation of going through a big transformation or health crisis while simultaneously trying to balance healthy relationships, or making ourselves available to help loved ones, or just all manner of survival.



Amazon Original Series Recommendations

These series are a great way to support and sample the work of an author you're interested in reading before committing to a longer work! I loved these all so much!

NEVER TELL COLLECTION

Buried secrets and lies

- *Everywhere You Look* by Liv Constantine
- *The Ghost Writer* by Loreth Anne White
- *The Other Side of the Road* by Andrea Bartz
- *Scorpions* by Rachel Howzell Hall
- *Jackrabbit Skin* by Ivy Pochoda
- *The Bad Friend* by Caroline Kepnes

CREATURE FEATURE SERIES

Greatest fears become reality

- *Big Bad* by Chandler Baker

OBSESSION COLLECTION

Psychological suspense tales about people crossing the line

- *Murder at the Royal Ruby* by Nita Prose
- *The Mosquito* by B. A. Paris
- *People Like Them* by Minka Kent
- *The Heart of a Mother* by Julie Clark
- *Just a Girl* by Alyssa Cole

TRESPASS COLLECTION

Nature vs. humans

- *The Tiger Came to the Mountains* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia
- *Stag* by Karen Russell
- *Bloody Summer* by Carmen Maria Machado

BLACK STARS SERIES

Futuristic and cosmic stories

- *The Visit* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie
- *The Black Pages* by Nnedi Okorafor
- *2043 … A Merman I Should Turn to Be* by Nisi Shawl
- *Clap Back* by Nalo Hopkinson

DARK CORNERS COLLECTION

Stories that will convince you to be afraid of the dark

- *Hannah-Beast* by Jennifer McMahon
- *The Sleep Tight Motel* by Lisa Unger
- *The Tangled Woods* by Emily Raboteau
- *Oak Avenue* by Brandi Reeds

Horromantasy

Horror + Romance + Fantasy

Not just “Horrormance” (Horror + Romance)—it’s too broad—and not “Romantasy” (Romance + Fantasy) because it lacks the dark fantasy elements. What I stumbled upon as I

have been rediscovering my love for Gothic horror are the books that follow this specific checklist:

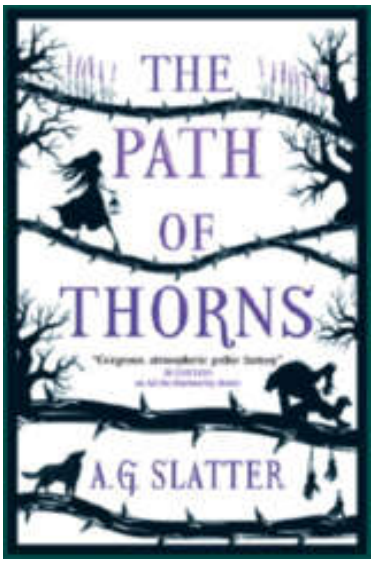
☑ Dark Fantasy
☑ Witchcraft or Magic
☑ Horror (supernatural, paranormal, or human monsters)
☑ Gothic Vibes (but not limited to this)

When I was in my early teens, I was a fantasy reader. I loved *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings.* I enjoyed losing myself in imaginary worlds with complex systems of magic where anything was possible. I craved the adventure of reluctant heroes sent on a quest to vanquish evil. Later, when I discovered Stephen King, and horror put its icy grip on my reader's heart, I eventually found my way into horror fantasy (or dark fantasy), like King's *Dark Tower* Series and *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin. In 2023, I fell hard into my Gothic era, which threw me down a twisted rabbit hole filled with crumbling castles, cliffside ancestral estates, dark magic, brooding and mysterious widowers, and fresh-faced governesses practicing witchcraft on the sly. I can't get enough of it. **Horromantasy*** has me in a chokehold—all my literary loves in one subgenre. May it always be so.

**Feel free to search for the #horromantasy hashtag I started on social media.*

> **Book Vibrations:** *beasts & monsters, botanical gardens, cursed families, family sagas, feminism, governesses, historical, marriage, murder mysteries, paranormal, rituals, sexual tension, supernatural, unrequited love, widows or widowers, witchcraft*

The Path of Thorns



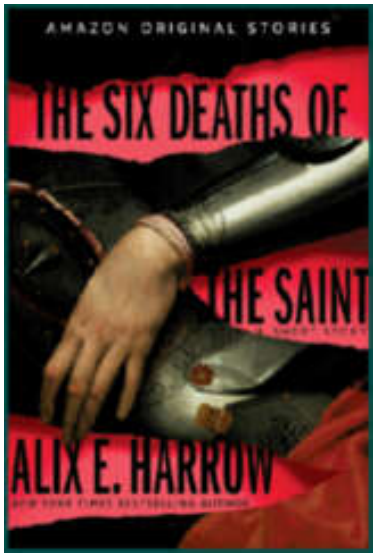
A. G. Slatter
TITAN BOOKS | 2022 | 384 PAGES

Asher Todd, a complicated woman with a bit of a secret agenda, comes to Morwood Grange as the children's new governess. Something in the woods chases her until she finds herself safe on the other side of the door on the first night when she arrives. And that's not the only troubling thing about her new home. There's an instability between the head of the household, Luther, and his ailing mother. Luther's wife seems to be afraid of her own shadow, and the house staff are tight-lipped about what happened to the previous governess. But Asher Todd is not as unassuming as she first appears and has ways of getting what she wants. By the time she executes her plan, the whole village will remember Asher Todd.

My Thoughts: This is my new all-time favorite book. It was written for me, for readers like me who love what I love about storytelling. Every single character comes alive on the page. Not one person is mentioned without a purpose for being there. Asher Todd is a memorable and new favorite woman protagonist. She's like a witchy Sherlock Holmes—her powers of deduction and reasoning coupled

with her knowledge of witchcraft and human behaviors make her the smartest woman in literature! There's nothing she can't do and there's no situation she can't navigate. I am totally in love with her. Slatter's imagination, plot development, and character-driven storytelling in this book skyrocketed her to my list of favorite authors. I will read everything in the Sourdough Universe.

The Six Deaths of the Saint

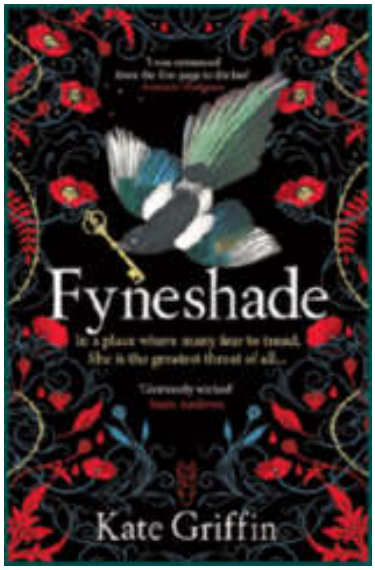


Alix E. Harrow
AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES | 2022 | 30 PAGES

You would think a story just thirty pages long would be easy to describe but I struggled to formulate a basic synopsis without giving too much away. The way I love this short story with my whole reader's heart is the most important thing for me to impress upon you. It's one of the best stories I've ever read. It's about an entity called The Saint of War who visits a servant girl during a time of need so she can fulfill her destiny as the greatest living warrior for a prince with high aspirations. But it's also about love and duty.

My Thoughts: *The Six Deaths of the Saint* is a whole mood. If I could turn it into a singular image and tattoo it somewhere on my body, I would. It's so metal. It's so beautiful, tragic, and romantic all at the same time. I went into this experience totally unprepared for the force of storytelling within it. You will too. I immediately bought more of Alix E. Harrow's work. This is the perfect example of how horror, romance, and fantasy can exist powerfully together.

FYNESHADE



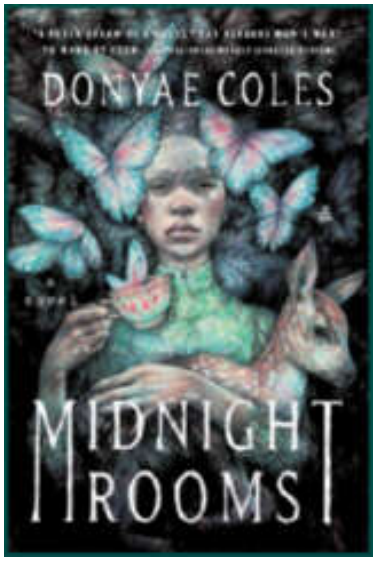
Kate Griffin
VIPER | 2023 | 384 PAGES

Marta is a sly, clever young woman who suddenly finds herself shipped off to a large mansion, Fyneshade, to care for the neglected ten-year-old daughter of a mysterious, wealthy man. Living at the estate, Marta is extremely observant, looking for ways she can make the most of her situation. She meets a strange man who claims to be the heir to Fyneshade but had a falling out with his father and is banned from ever entering the premises for the rest of his life. Marta knows she can develop

a relationship with this man to get closer to her dreams of success and stability.

My Thoughts: What a diabolical woman! Marta never ceased to amaze me. She was so unpredictable; I never knew what to expect or how she would handle herself in a situation. One of my all-time favorite Gothic tropes is that of the new governess: a storyline that follows a young woman as she gets to know her new surroundings and the children that will be in her care. *Fyneshade* adds new twists to this classic trope by introducing unique elements that turn everything on its head. The child in Marta's care is one of my new favorite child protagonists. In fact, all of the characters in this book are equally fascinating and memorable. And none of them are very wholesome; they're all flawed and morally gray which makes everything so much more interesting.

Midnight Rooms



Donyae Coles
AMISTAD | 2024 | 336 PAGES

Orphaned at a young age, Orabella Mumthrope was taken in by her uncle. Never expected to marry, she catches the eye of Elias Blakersby who makes an offer neither she nor her family can refuse. She is whisked off to Korringhill Manor to meet his mysterious and eccentric family. Strange nocturnal activities become an increasingly alarming situation for Orabella, but she is starting to fall in love with her new life and maybe even the stranger she married.

My Thoughts: This is one of those unusual books in which every chapter surprises you and you're constantly wondering, "What am I reading right now?" I enjoyed the dark fairy-tale quality of the storytelling. It feels authentic and realistic yet whimsical and otherworldly at the same time. I honestly don't know how Donyae Coles managed it. Imagine something like the setting of *Crimson Peak* with the animalistic energy of the characters in *Yellowjackets,* combined with the classic vibes of *Beauty and the Beast*. That's this book.

STARLING HOUSE

Alix E. Harrow

TOR BOOKS | 2023 | 320 PAGES

In a small, dying coal town in Kentucky, Opal and her brother are struggling to make ends meet. Opal becomes increasingly obsessed with the town's infamous Starling House, owned by Eleanor Starling, an author rumored to have murdered her husband for money so she could build herself a Gothic manor to hide away in while she wrote her novel, Underland. *Opal is hired by Arthur Starling, the mysterious heir. The two strike up an unlikely friendship while uncovering the secrets of Starling House together.*

My Thoughts: Opal and Arthur are good together. She's a little abrasive and self-serving; he's awkward and unassuming. Their interactions are entertaining and sometimes even a little embarrassing. He gave me Howl vibes from *Howl's Moving Castle* (2004); in fact, that combined with the cover and some of the storyline makes it a great match for Howl's fans. I'll be completely transparent and confess that, at first, the juxtaposition of Gothic themes and vibes set in modern Kentucky with cell phones did not work for me. My investment and love for this book was at a lukewarm interest level for the first half of the book, BUT as the slow burn gives way to a full-blown fire … my fondness was stoked into fandom. It's a solid representation of Horromantasy.

SALT & BROOM

Sharon Lynn Fisher
47NORTH | 2023 | 282 PAGES

Sharon Lynn Fisher pays homage to the Gothic classic, Jane Eyre, *and makes it witchy. The protagonist in this story, Jane Aire, is an orphan who grew up in an all-girls school called Lowood. A mysterious stranger solicits the services of a "Lowood witch" to help rid his estate of a pervasive darkness. Jane Aire, with her extensive knowledge of protective charms and herbology, seems to be the woman for the job.*

My Thoughts: This is the perfect example of how horror can be cozy. Jane Aire arrives at this large, looming estate and is taken to a cottage in an overgrown herb garden where she is to live while she's employed at Thornfield Hall. She meets a cat named Sybil who watches her sweep the floors and unpack. Jane is invited to have dinner with her new employer, and it is then that readers find out there will be a potential love interest, a murder mystery to solve, and that Thornfield is haunted. This is the book that convinced me to read more paranormal, Gothic, ghostly romance during the spooky season, October to December. Books like this exist to wrap readers in all the scrumptious seasonal tropes we're looking for during the fall/winter.

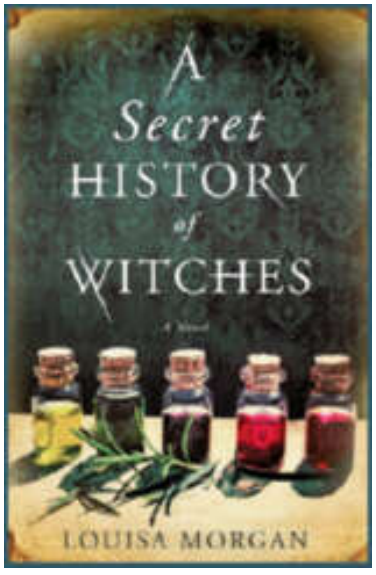
Cottage Spells & Family Sagas

I love cozy books about witches and witchcraft. Just like the thriller and mystery genre has its cozy mysteries, horror has its cozy side too. I like to define cozy horror as: storylines with low stakes, comfortable settings capitalizing on food preparation and cottagecore aesthetics, heartwarming relationships, and spooky or

eerie vibes. Witchy horror is unique in that it captures the duality of a woman's experience. Stories blend cozy settings like quaint cottages and enchanted forests with themes like the fierce bonds of sisterhood and moments of intense emotional depth. These stories explore love, loss, and survival, often against the backdrop of persecution. The witch can be both nurturing and resilient. She can heal others while protecting herself or her family. This contrast, softness entwined with strength, creates a deeply realistic narrative, celebrating the complexity of being many things at once in a world that tries to pigeonhole everyone into comfortable labels.

Book Vibrations: *coming into power, consequences, cottagecore, family, fantasy, female friendships, feminism, magical realism, mothers & daughters, romance, spells & witchcraft, witches*

A Secret History of Witches



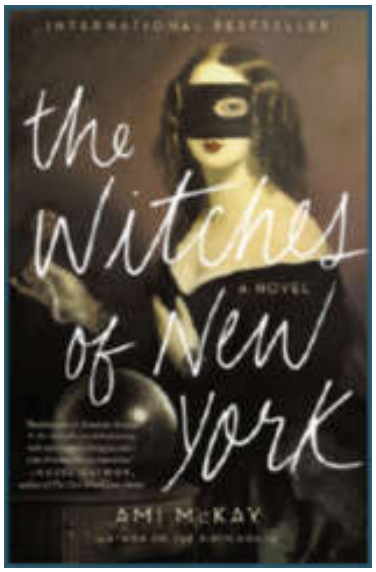
Louisa Morgan
ORBIT BOOKS | 2017 | 496 PAGES

This is the epic saga of five mothers and daughters in a family of Romani witches telling their coming-of-age stories and how the secret gift of magic from their power ancestor, GrandMere Ursule, is taught to them and how they choose to use it.

My Thoughts: In a rich, historical storytelling style reminiscent of Philippa Gregory, Louisa Morgan skillfully weaves a vibrant and colorful tapestry of generational witchcraft and the powerful impact it has on each woman throughout many years of her life. The narrative is divided into five separate books—one for each woman's story: Nanette, her daughter Ursule, her daughter, Iréne, her daughter Morwen, and lastly, Morwen's daughter, Veronica.

Each woman's story is so compelling and remarkably different. Some daughters have mothers who look forward to passing on the legacy of witchcraft and the scrying stone. Some daughters are eager to learn and love the craft, while others exploit their gift and wield it for selfish gain. All the women are tempted in different ways to cheat death or sickness or circumstance. I listened to the audiobook and read the e-book at the same time so I could have a fully immersed reading experience. I was blown away by the author's gift of prose; the way she could capture the smallest details to enhance a scene. And life at Orchard Farm is everything. I loved all the homestead scenes–animal caretaking, food preparations and meals, and traveling to the farmer's markets. While this book feels good while you're reading it with its cozy vibes and historical aesthetics, there are strong themes of grief and loss, patriarchal oppression, consequences for practicing witchcraft, death, war, and suffering through pain and heartache. It truly is an epic saga, and one I will never forget.

THE WITCHES OF NEW YORK

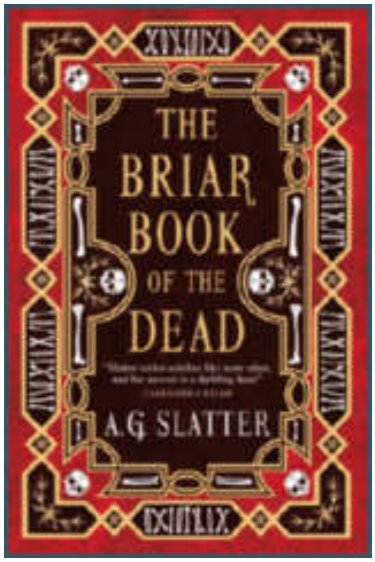


Ami McKay
HARPER PERENNIAL | 2017 | 560 PAGES

It's 1880 in New York. Adelaide and Eleanor have a tea shop specializing in the secret lives of Manhattan socialites. The two women lavish their clientele with all the latest in popular spiritualism practices, elixirs, readings, and séances. A beguiling woman named Beatrice is hired on as an apprentice. Adelaide and Eleanor quickly realize Beatrice is quite a gifted medium. Before they can decide how to best utilize her special gifts, she is gone, which calls into question the stability of their situation living as undercover witches in a society unfavorable toward women with any kind of power or special ability.

My Thoughts: I don't know where I was when this book released; all I know is that I missed it and now, after enjoying it for the first time almost ten years later, I'm such an Ami McKay fan! *The Witches of New York* has a little bit of everything I love about good storytelling. It's intricately plotted, so much so that I forgot I was reading fiction. Such a thought-provoking story with themes of feminism and spiritualism. The protagonists are such strong ambassadors for everything I love about women in community. I still feel the spirits and personalities of Beatrice, Adelaide, and Eleanor long after I turned the last page.

The Briar Book of the Dead



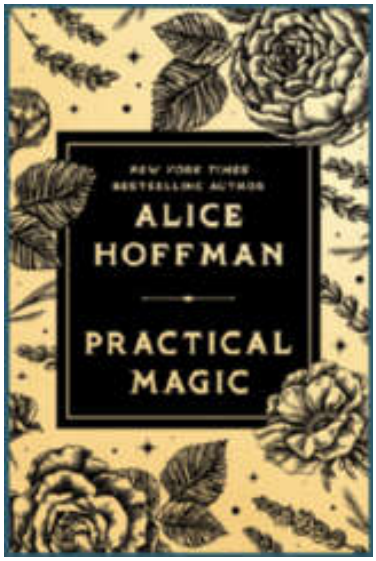
A. G. Slatter
TITAN BOOKS | 2024 | 400 PAGES

The Briar family of witches serves the village of Silverton. When the matriarch passes away suddenly, the younger generation scrambles to fulfill their new duties and responsibilities. Ellie Briar struggles with finding her place and importance since she was born with no magic. She can heal and make potions and elixirs, but there is no power behind her spell casting. After a hard fall, she suddenly sees the dead and realizes her true calling and service to the Briar family and Silverton. Meanwhile, something sinister is threatening everything, and Ellie must rise to the challenge, maybe before she is ready.

My Thoughts: After reading Slatter's *The Path of Thorns,* I jumped into this book without delay. The only cure for the hangover Slatter left me with was more of Slatter's Sourdough Universe. These books share a connected universe, but they are stand-alone novels and can be read in any order. I say they are Horromantasy books, blending

horror, romance, and dark fantasy elements. For each book, I read the library e-book and listened to the audiobook at the same time. The narrator's voice adds a layer of warmth and depth to the main characters Slattery creates so effortlessly. The descriptions of village life, abundant hearty meals at the table, secret conversations by the hearth, and preparations for festivals are richly detailed. Each Briar witch has a distinct personality and presence on the page. There is a sense of urgency threaded through all the world-building so that the pacing stays brisk. I spent countless hours listening to Slatter's books back-to-back in 2024, living my best bookish life.

Practical Magic



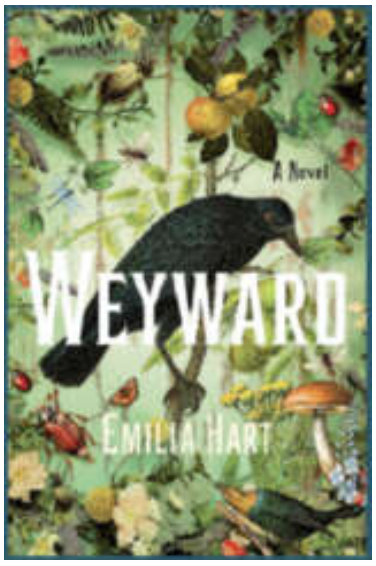
Alice Hoffman
PENGUIN | 1995 | 304 PAGES

Set in a small town in Massachusetts, Practical Magic *centers on two sisters, Gillian and Sally Owens, who were raised by their aunts in a whimsical, magical household. Now the Owens sisters are grown, leading lives of their own. Sally, recently widowed, has two teenage daughters adding to the generational pull and seasons of life represented in this*

family dynamic. Gillian is the free-spirited sister who shows up one day with a dead body in her car. Together, the women display acts of selfless love and sisterhood while also struggling to balance their personal lives.

My Thoughts: This book starts, "For more than two hundred years, the Owens women have been blamed for everything that has gone wrong in town." *Practical Magic,* while doubling down on those cozy vibes, captures strong feminist themes of legacy, fierce love, sisterhood bonds, and female agency and power. Sure, it's whimsical and cute but underneath it all vibrates a current of truth: Fuck the patriarchy, plain and simple. But also, where two or more women are gathered, there is strength.

WEYWARD



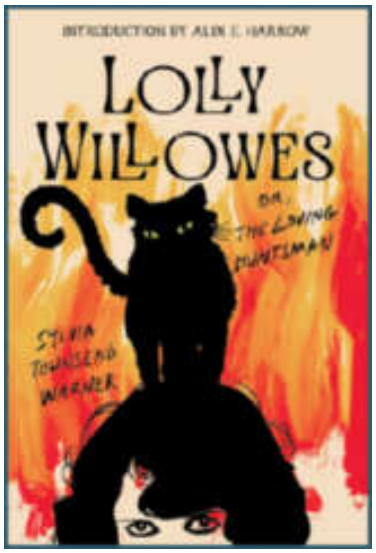
Emilia Hart
ST. MARTIN'S PRESS | 2023 | 336 PAGES

The Weyward women have always had a unique connection to nature which has helped them resist the bonds of patriarchy. Readers follow three generations of women over five centuries in England. Altha, a

healer in 1619, is accused of witchcraft and forced to stand trial. In the 1940s, Violet struggles under the oppressive nature of her father and is on a journey to solve the mystery of her mother's mysterious death. Present day, Kate has bravely filed for divorce from her abusive husband and has planned to hide away in her great Aunt Violet's cottage.

My Thoughts: The themes of woman empowerment and advocating for personal agency against the weight of patriarchal suppression was emotionally stirring and powerful. I love that women have reclaimed the narrative surrounding witches and witchcraft so that we can tell stories of overcoming persecution instead of meeting our end tied to a stake. The fortitude and resilience of women is a theme I will never tire of reading. Watching these three women fight back against the forces trying to hold them down using their connection to nature, magical abilities, and the spirit of independence felt like more than just a fantasy tale employing magical realism elements—it felt like a call to rise in our own ways.

Lolly Willowes



Silvia Townsend Warner (1926)

UNION SQUARE & CO. | 2025 | 176 PAGES

After Laura (Lolly) Willowes' father dies, she's expected to be absorbed by her family as a woman of advanced age (she's only twenty-eight!) and unmarried with no prospects. Lolly decides to leave her family and station in life in exchange for solitude in a small, remote village. There, Lolly discovers, "… women living and growing old, as common as blackberries …". Lolly learns she is prone to wandering in the woods and strikes up a conversation with Satan, whom she later refers to as "her loving huntsman." A kitten also randomly shows up in her bedroom, and she names him Vinegar; he's the perfect companion and an important addition to the storyline. Here, Lolly is happy and unrestrained—free to come and go as she pleases.

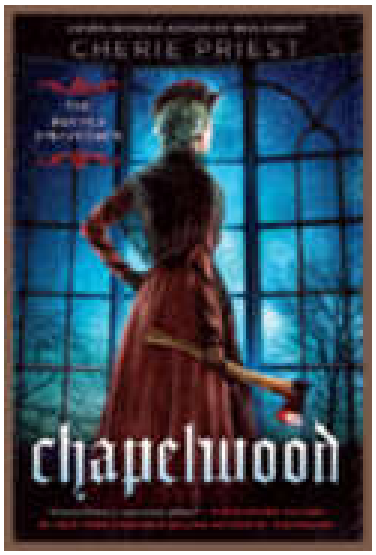
My Thoughts: *Lolly Willowes* is the blueprint for the beloved witchy horror book *Slewfoot* by Brom. Both protagonists, Lolly (*Lolly Willowes*) and Abitha (*Slewfoot*), act in defiance of the societal norms their communities require of them: Lolly, a spinster, and Abitha, a widow. Both women turn to self-isolation, the company of a good cat, and Satan. *Lolly Willowes* is required reading for fans of *Slewfoot,* witches, and powerful feminine energy.

50 States, 50 Books by Women

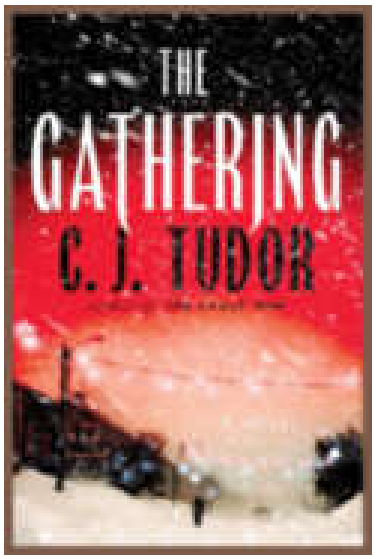
There was an article in a big newspaper where the journalist picked a horror book for all 50 states. I thought it was such a great idea, and the journalist did an amazing job putting the list together—it's a big project! I felt like it was a little short on diversity though. The selections were mostly written by men and there were a few duplicates. So, I have compiled my own list using just books by women.

Shout-out to the 50 States Reading Challenge on The StoryGraph—I looked at the available selections to choose books that I have either read or wanted to read so I could compile this list. Some of the states required me to physically pick up books in my house and scan for locations because I suspected they were set in a state I needed to cover but the location wasn't mentioned in the synopsis.

1. Alabama: *Chapelwood* by Cherie Priest – I listened to the audiobook, which was perfect considering the epistolary style and multiple points of view. Lizzie Borden is part of an investigative duo sent to the deep South to stop a serial axe murderer. They also discover an underground occult society of people summoning cosmic entities to bring about the end times. There's a lot going on in this book and it's a little too much at times; but the nonstop gruesome action, high stakes, and good vs. evil theme are entertaining. It's a good time.

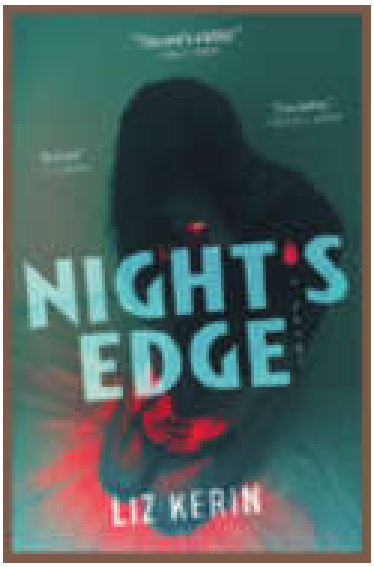


2. Alaska: *The Gathering* by C. J. Tudor – I have always been a fan of crime investigation thrillers mashed with supernatural horror, and this dystopian, vampire, murder mystery is a perfect example.

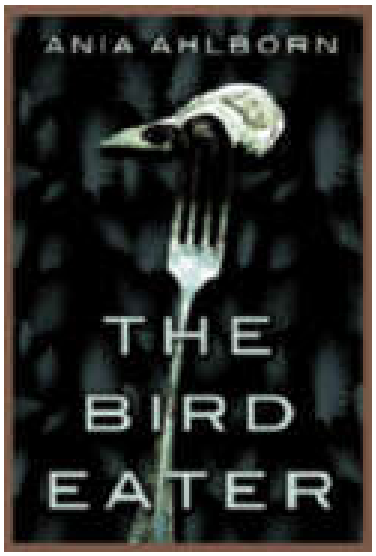


3. Arizona: *Night's Edge/First Light* by Liz Kerin – I devoured this suspenseful postapocalyptic horror duology focusing on a mother and daughter's toxic relationship in the aftermath of a charismatic leader who turned Mia's mother into a vampire. Book two picks

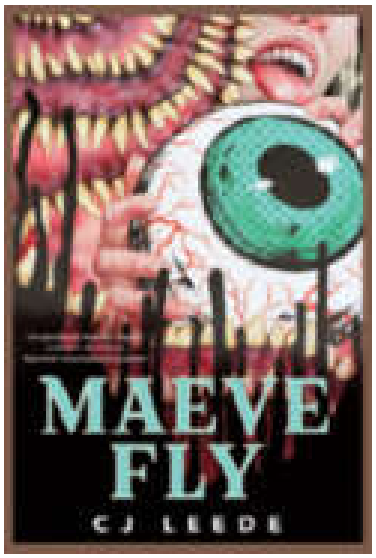
right up where one leaves off and delivers on sweet, sweet vengeance.



4. Arkansas: *The Bird Eater* by Ania Ahlborn – A man returns to his hometown to face his turbulent past and take up residence in the family home, which is the local legend haunted house. You can read this on Kindle Unlimited© if you have Amazon Prime®.

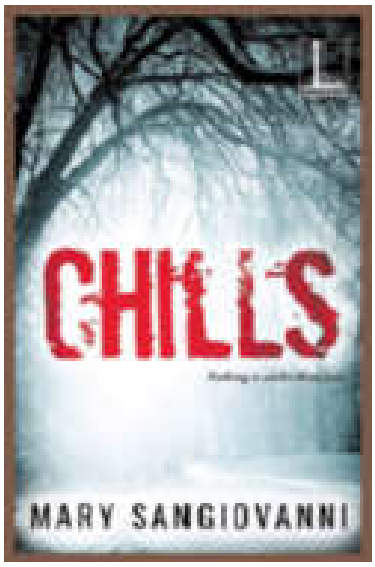


5. California: *Maeve Fly* by CJ Leede – Go into this one knowing that it is the graphic unraveling of a woman who has the most wholesome job as a princess at a famous local theme park. After hours, Maeve participates in the most unwholesome of activities with reckless abandon, which may have attracted an unwelcome follower.

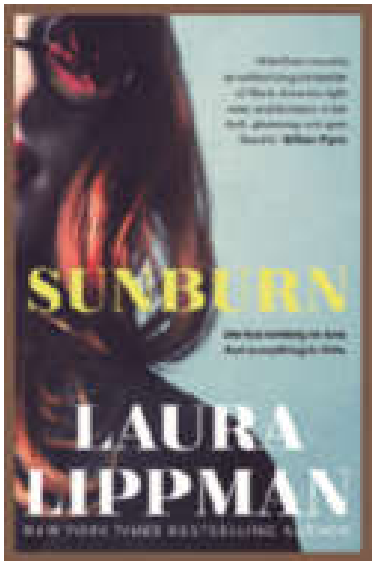


6. Colorado: *White Horse* by Erika T. Wurth – This is the perfect blend of murder mystery and paranormal activity. A Native woman intentionally lives an urban life off the reservation but can't seem to move forward with her life since the past and the ghost of her mother persistently haunt her.

7. Connecticut: *Chills* by Mary SanGiovanni – There is never a dull moment in this atmospheric, cosmic, survival horror set during an intense snowstorm. Action-packed from page one, this book shows the main protagonist, Kathy Ryan, as a resourceful, capable paranormal expert who comes up against supernatural creatures and ancient terrors with a realistic bravery that horror fans will love.

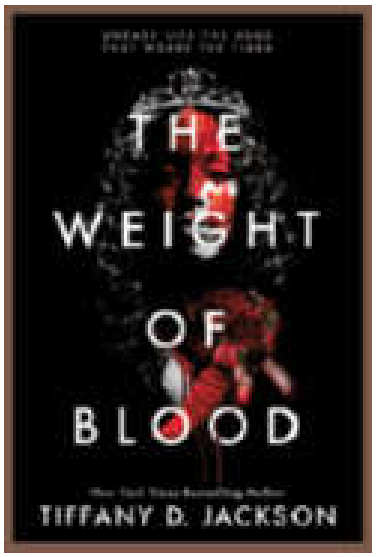


8. Delaware: *Sunburn* by Laura Lippman – In this unnerving psychological thriller, people wrestle with the consequences of their choices. Themes of obsession, manipulation, and betrayal add dark undertones to an already uneasy storyline riddled with suspense and tension. There aren't any supernatural or paranormal elements to be classified as a traditional horror book, but it made me feel so unsettled and chilled, I knew I had to recommend it.

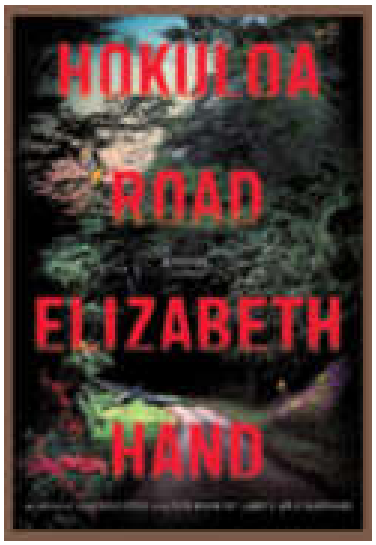


9. Florida: *Cirque Berserk* by Jessica Guess – Available on Kindle Unlimited, this book is part of the Rewind or Die series from Unnerving and takes place in Shadows Creek, Florida (1989). It's a campy romp with a group of teens who are hunted down one by one in a carnival after hours.

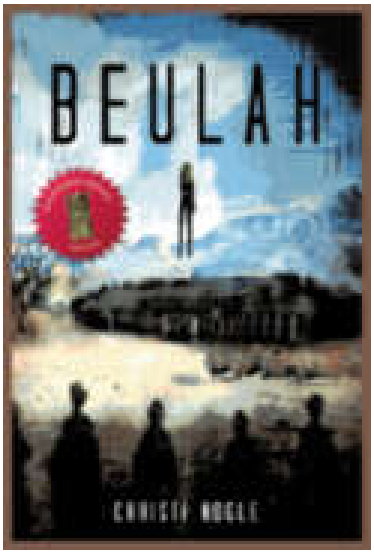
10. Georgia: *The Weight of Blood* by Tiffany D. Jackson – I was not expecting to love this reimagining of Stephen King's *Carrie* as much as I did. It's available on hoopla and Kindle Unlimited.



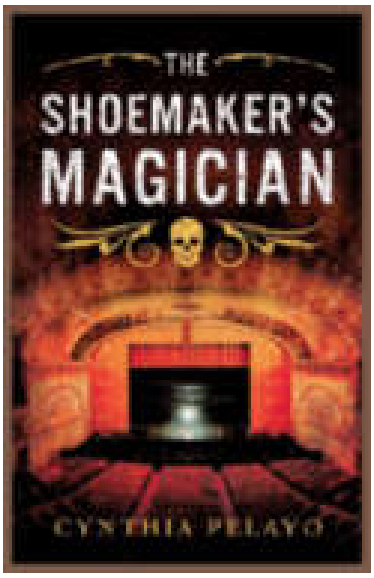
11. Hawaii: *Hokuloa Road* by Elizabeth Hand – I wanted to read some horror set in Hawaii when I took a vacation there for the first time a few years ago. This book was perfect! It's available on Kindle Unlimited. A young man travels to paradise to be a caretaker on an isolated, sprawling estate. The woman he met on the plane winds up missing, and he starts snooping around only to find someone is watching him too.



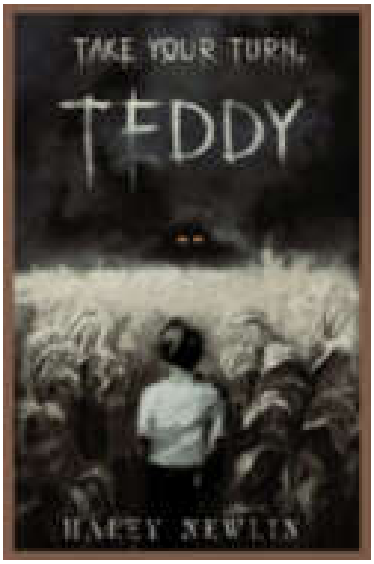
12. Idaho: *Beulah* by Christi Nogle – Available on Kindle Unlimited, this book is a paranormal slow-burn novel centered on family and ghosts. A mother and her three daughters have come to Beulah, Idaho to help a family friend renovate a house. Eighteen-year-old Georgie is a narrator you won't soon forget. Her angsty, daydreaming, wandering soul can see ghosts. If you're looking for something quick and light, this is probably not your jam; but if you want to be immersed in moody atmosphere and a sprawling coming-of-age tale, do not sleep on this one!



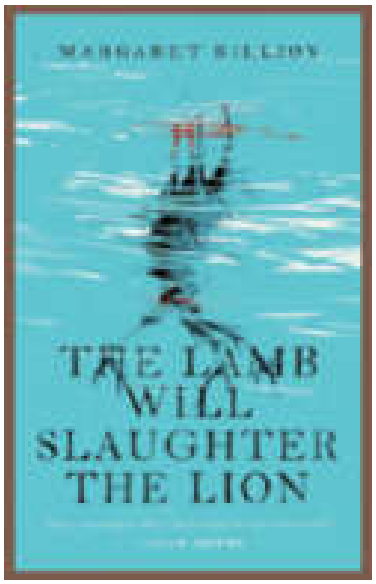
13. Illinois: *The Shoemaker's Magician* by Cynthia Pelayo – A strong blend of crime noir thriller and supernatural horror, the story centers on Lauren Medina who is investigating a gruesome crime. The city of Chicago is almost like a character itself because of the forgotten cinema history, ancient curses, and underground occultism influencing the lives of modern-day people who make their home there.



14. Indiana: *Take Your Turn, Teddy* by Haley Newlin – This book utilizes both supernatural and human monsters to concoct a psychological coming-of-age nightmare that is totally underrated. I just want more people to read it—a great example of horror with heart, as it is both emotionally stirring and high risk due to the up-front investment in the child protagonist, Teddy.

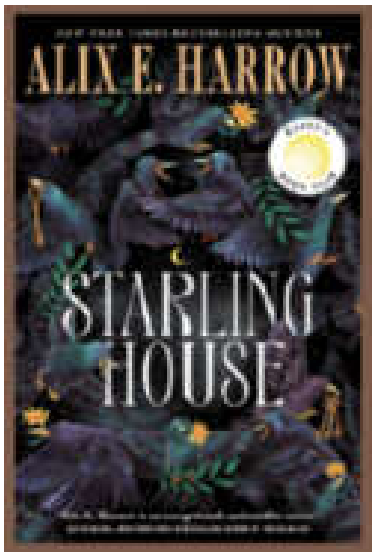


15. Iowa: *The Lamb Will Slaughter the Lion* by Margaret Killjoy – In this dark urban fantasy, a person investigates the unusual circumstances surrounding a friend who went "no contact" after they left for a mysterious commune in rural Iowa. I loved the anarchy/punk element of the commune and the gender fluidity/diversity of the cast of characters. The magical realism and supernatural elements elevated the story into something unique and memorable. A fast read too! I borrowed and read this book in-app on hoopla.



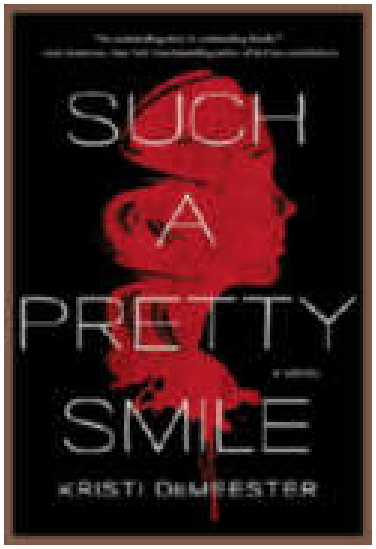
16. Kansas: *Red Station* by Kenzie Jennings – If you enjoy badass women protagonists and vivid, detailed, colorful descriptions of all the nuanced movements in an action scene—this book is a wild ride. Like a Western final girl slasher. It's so much fun.

17. Kentucky: *Starling House* by Alix E. Harrow – As far as Gothic books go, this one crosses off all the essential elements. There's a creepy estate, a mysterious brooding man, a cursed family, small town secrets, and the potential for romance.

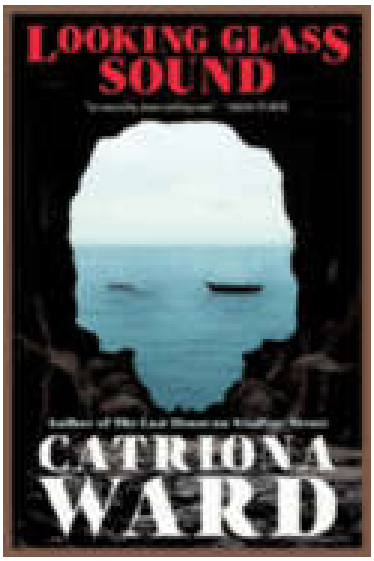


18. Louisiana: *Such A Pretty Smile* by Kristi DeMeester – This book is perfect for the "coming-of-rage" theme readers are gravitating toward these days. The story centers on a mother and

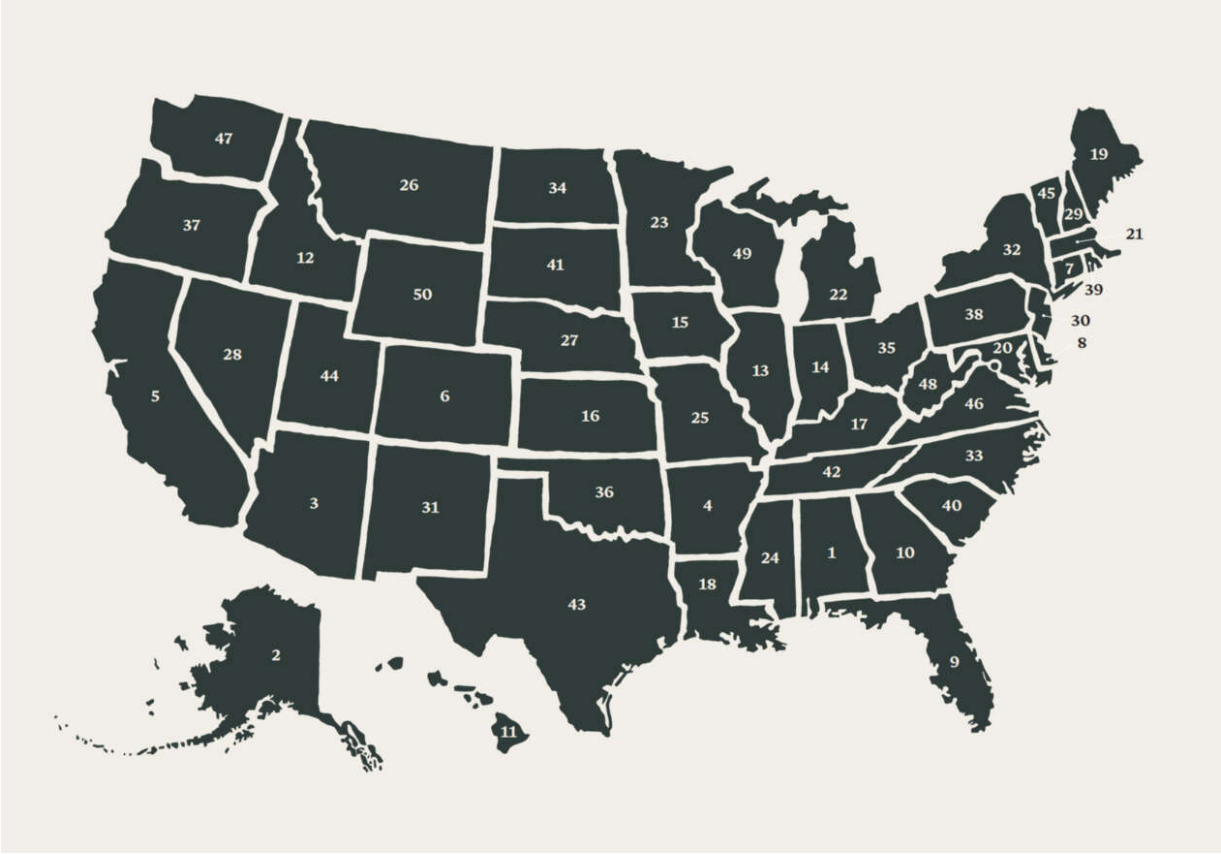
daughter relationship during a time when their small town is reeling from a series of violent kidnappings targeting young women who won't be silenced.



19. Maine: *Looking Glass Sound* by Catriona Ward – When I tell you that this book mesmerized me, I mean that I could not think of anything else while I was reading it. A young man named Wilder Harlow writes an entire book about the summer he and his childhood best friends got sucked into a murder mystery in the small coastal town where they're living. The dynamic of the friend group becomes so seductively twisted and complicated—this intense horror/thriller will not let you go!

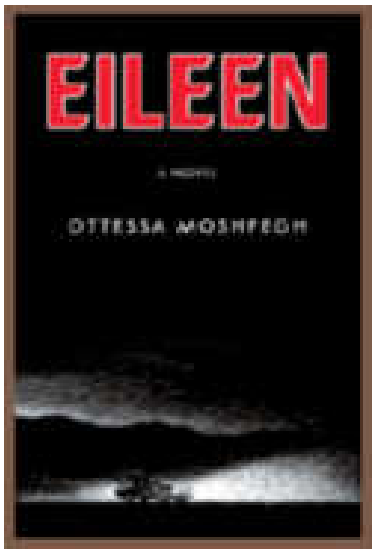


20. Maryland: *Wait Till Helen Comes: The Graphic Novel* by Mary Downing Hahn, adapted by Scott Peterson, illustrated by Meredith Laxton and Russ Badget – A blended family is struggling to get along when the two parents suddenly decide to move to rural Maryland and live in a church. When exploring, the kids find the church's graveyard—their new backyard. I originally enjoyed this book after getting it from a Scholastic Book Fair© in middle school, and it became one of my favorite ghost stories. I loved this graphic novel adaptation so much. Dive in, especially if you love "bad seed" creepy/evil kids. It's available on hoopla.



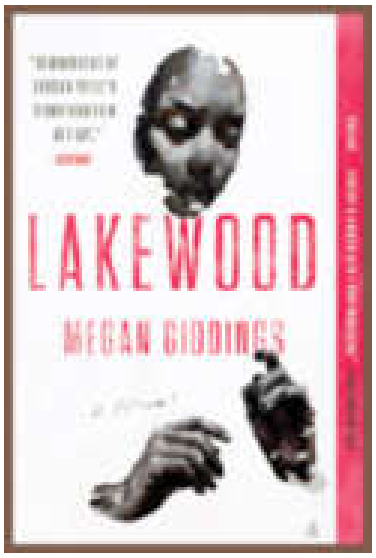
21. Massachusetts: *Eileen* by Ottessa Moshfegh – Listen, it's not horror by any stretch of the imagination or genre boundaries but it

is dark and suspenseful and it's one of my favorite books. It's so dead-on set in Massachusetts too. I can't think of any other book I'd recommend here. It's the story of a young woman who lives with her father—a retired police officer with an alcohol problem. Eileen always wants to leave, but she never does. She's sort of stuck in a rut working at her grim job at the local boy's correctional facility. The new resident psychologist is a beautiful woman that Eileen becomes immediately obsessed with—their relationship changes her life. I listened to the audiobook (because you have to) and checked out the e-book at the same time so I could highlight quotes while I listened. It's one of my favorite books, and the movie adaptation is okay but not nearly as good because you don't get all of Eileen's private thoughts.

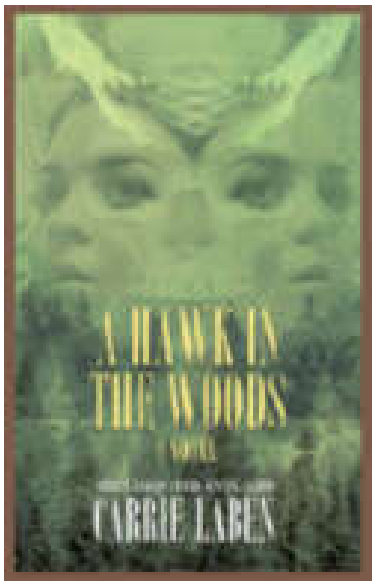


22. Michigan: *Lakewood* by Megan Giddings – If you enjoyed *Natural Beauty* by Ling Ling Huang, you will love this premise. It's very similar. Lena needs to help support her family, so she drops out of school to participate full-time at an experimental, secret laboratory. The side effects begin to take a toll, causing Lena to wonder if she can survive her new position. This is more dystopian than *Natural Beauty*, but the young women in both stories undergo a

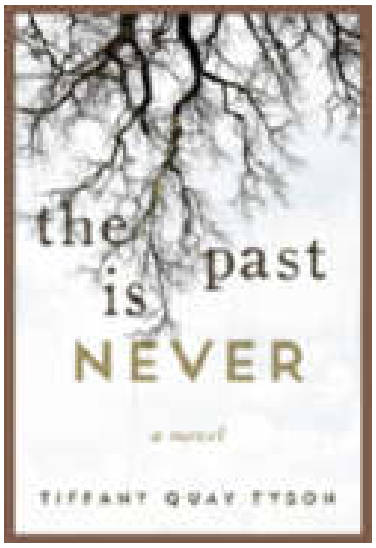
transformation due to their involvement with sinister corporations with ulterior motives. They're both so good.



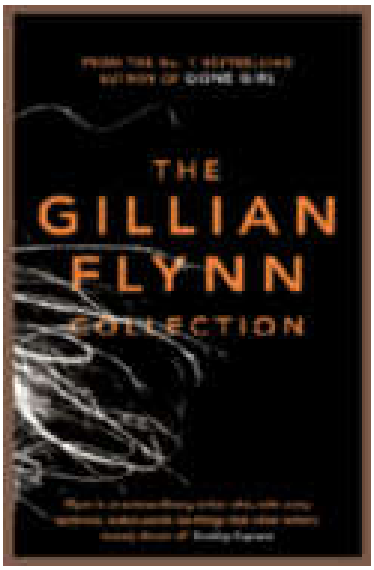
23. Minnesota: *A Hawk in the Woods* by Carrie Laben – Abby Waite gets some life-altering news that changes the direction of her life drastically, starting with her intention to break her sister out of prison. The reader goes on a road trip with the two sisters who have spent some time apart but waste no time getting back to usual. Well, whatever is usual for them. Abby and Martha are twins. They each have some remarkable powers. Abby can "push" people mentally and Martha can "fold" time. The sense of foreboding due to harrowing flashbacks to when the twins lived in a cult with their parents is pervasive and compelling. More people need to read this book!



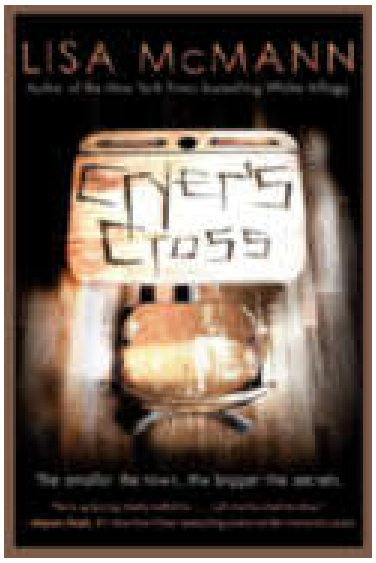
24. Mississippi: *The Past is Never* by Tiffany Quay Tyson – This harrowing coming-of-age story set in rural Mississippi starts at a cursed abandoned rock quarry and ends in the mangroves of Florida. It was the comps for this Southern Gothic novel that got my attention, "Perfect for fans of Flannery O'Connor and Dorothy Allison." I'm happy to report I am that fan, and it was perfect. Reading this book felt like I had a fresh bruise on my heart and this story had its finger on it … applying a slow, painful pressure, a dull ache, and sense of dread. Be mindful, there are heavy themes of racial hate and violence, the behaviors of monsters who walk among us, and the generational trauma of women, enslaved people, and children. It's a tale of survival and a personal quest for truth.



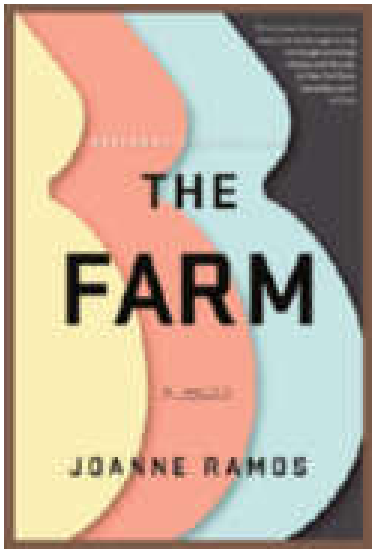
25. Missouri: All of **Gillian Flynn's** novels are set in Missouri: ***Gone Girl, Sharp Objects,*** and ***Dark Places.*** – People hesitate to include her books on horror lists, but I find them to be quite adjacent. Especially *Sharp Objects* and *Dark Places.* The storylines are so dark and unexpected in their unraveling of human monsters and depravity, I always include them in my horror recommendations. If you can take on a Gillian Flynn novel and don't feel unsettled, my hat's off to you. You're braver than I am. The only thing I would want from Flynn is just more books—I feel abandoned by her. If you're reading this, Flynn—how dare you. Come back!



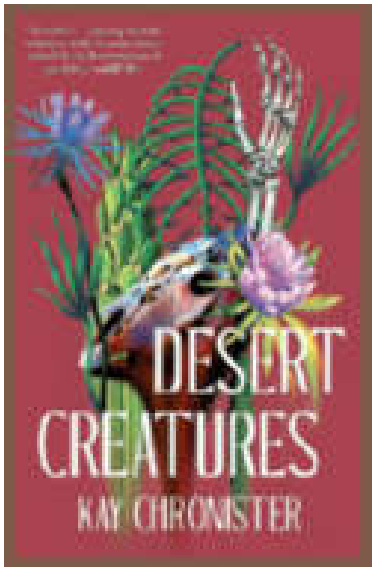
26. Montana: *Cryer's Cross* by Lisa McMann – I'll be straight up with you, there are a lot of popular horror books written by men and set in Montana. I had to dig deep to find this book. I read it on hoopla. The story is set in the small town of Cryer's Cross and follows a teenage girl named Kendall who suffers from OCD. Two classmates disappear, which is the beginning of a series of unsettling events that all seem to be connected to a haunted desk at the school. I think this book would be perfect for young readers or adults just getting started on their horror genre journey.



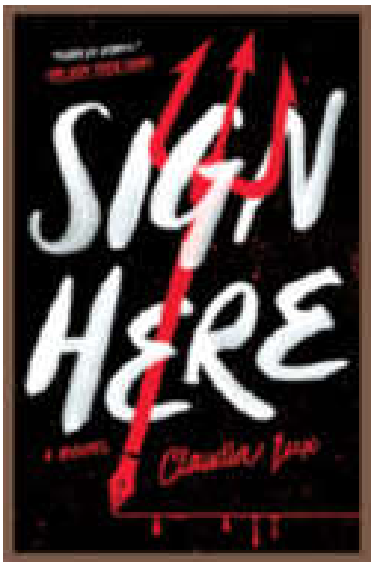
27. Nebraska: *The Farm* by Joanne Ramos – This speculative, dystopian novel explores themes of motherhood, reproductive rights, and the surrogacy industry. Intense social commentary and the horrors of women being deprived of personal agency land this book squarely in horror, in my humble opinion. It was a thought-provoking and strangely comforting experience for me, as I thoroughly enjoyed the detailed descriptions of the retreat and amenities.



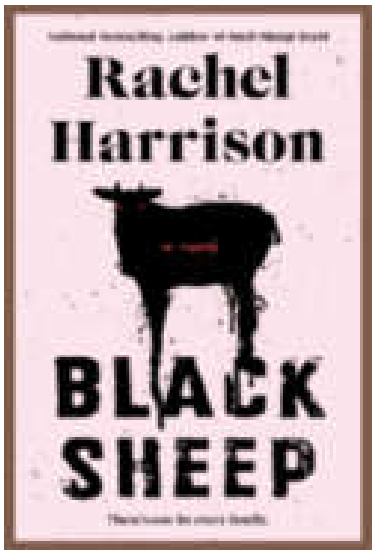
28. Nevada: *Desert Creatures* by Kay Chronister – This postapocalyptic and dystopian horror features a strong, disabled protagonist fighting against her odds to survive. There are psychological perils, human monsters, supernatural creatures, and the unrelenting desert landscape all pressing in on Magdala. The atmospheric and character-driven storytelling rocketed Kay Chronister to my new favorite authors list. Between this debut and *The Bog Wife,* I am a huge fan.



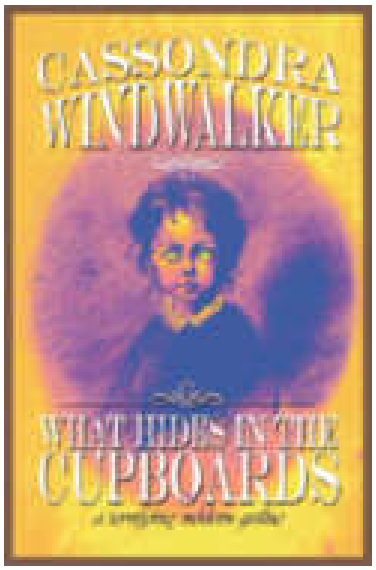
29. New Hampshire: *Sign Here* by Claudia Lux – There are two stories that come together as one in this supernatural horror and thriller hybrid. One story follows a guy who works in hell, determined to move up the ranks by convincing another member of the Harrison family to sell their soul. The other story is the salacious, juicy, addicting domestic drama of the Harrison family, and the pages fly by! So utterly compelling. Do not sleep on this one.



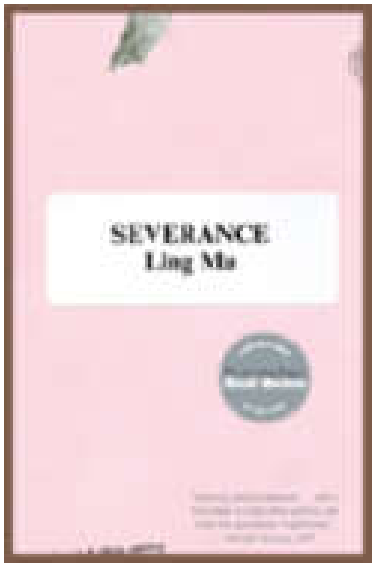
30. New Jersey: *Black Sheep* by Rachel Harrison – You must go into this book blind. Do not read anything about it, not even the back of the book. All you need to know is that a young woman returns to her hometown to attend her cousin's wedding, which is a big deal for her since she is estranged from her family. That's it—that's all I'm willing to share about the plot, but I can also say that Harrison's books are always full of "good for her" moments, relatable situations and characters, and are incredibly entertaining. *Black Sheep* is a good time.



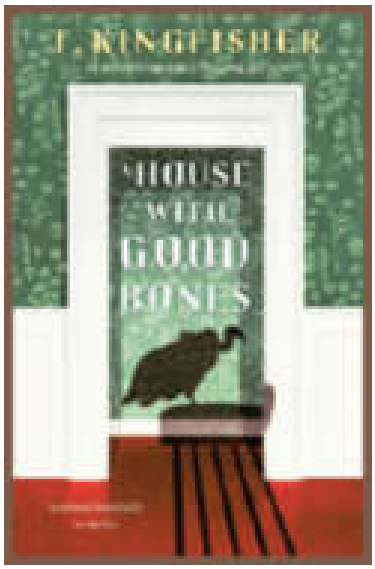
31. New Mexico: *What Hides in the Cupboards* by Cassondra Windwalker – Under two hundred pages, this story offers a blend of dark fantasy with horror elements that readers will love. Exploring the themes of childhood trauma, this book emphasizes the main character's unique journey of healing through her discovery and exploration of magic cupboards inside her new home.



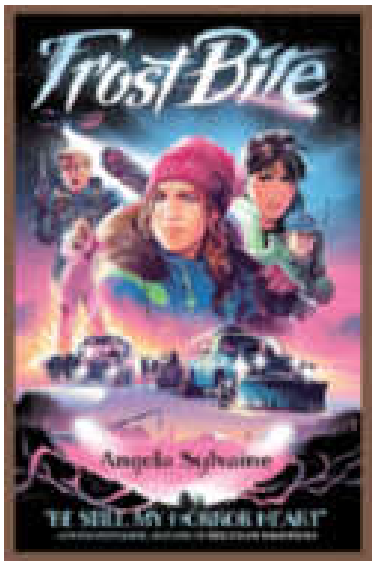
32. New York: *Severance* by Ling Ma – I tell everyone that this is the coziest apocalyptic horror novel you will ever read. At times, it gave me *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel vibes with its dual timelines in the past and present, but also *Bird Box* by Josh Malerman vibes with its band of survivors and being pregnant during very uncertain and hostile times. I'm also shocked this was written pre-COVID; the similarities are striking.



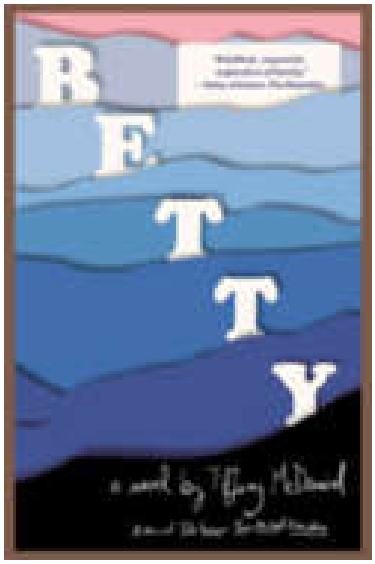
33. North Carolina: *A House with Good Bones* by T. Kingfisher – This reading experience will always have a special little spark in my heart because I listened to the audiobook while I was signing copies of my first book for the August 2023 Night Worms package. It's the perfect combination of horror and humor. The main character, Sam, is bright and quirky, and a lot of fun. She's excited to spend time with her mother in her childhood home but realizes soon after arriving that something is off. Perfect for fans of stories centering womanhood, women protagonists, ghosts, and—*gulp*—insect horror. The audiobook is on hoopla!



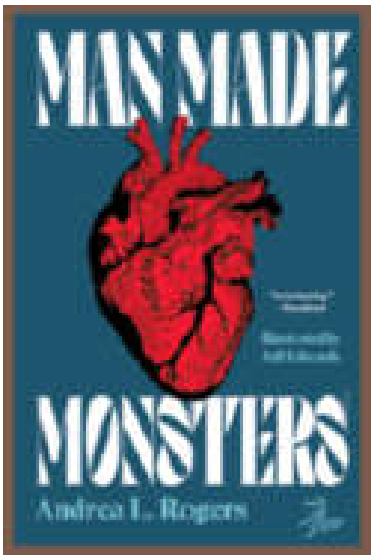
34. North Dakota: *Frost Bite* by Angela Sylvaine – A vivid wintry landscape whisks readers away to North Dakota during the holiday season. The main characters, best friends Ralene and Nate, are on a quest to defeat some alien worms who are invading people's minds. This book is a fast-paced, imaginative blend of fantasy elements and horror tropes that creates the perfect supernatural survivor adventure for your winter/holiday TBR list. I will definitely read more from Sylvaine.



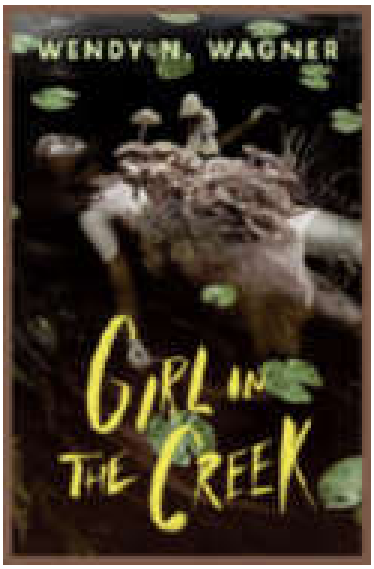
35. Ohio: *Betty* by Tiffany McDaniel – I'll preface this straight away with the truth that this book is not what I would consider to be horror, but I'm including it because Tiffany McDaniel's storytelling is so utterly compelling and dark, so suspenseful that her work translates as adjacent to horror. The themes of this book are so heavy and emotional. It's a sprawling family saga, immersing the reader in its family secrets and generational trauma.



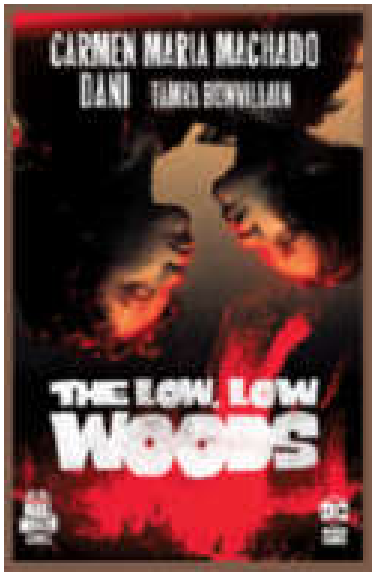
36. Oklahoma: *Man Made Monsters* by Andrea L. Rogers – This is a must-have short story collection about trauma, identity, human experiences, and Indigenous culture told through the lens of monsters—what it means to be a monster. The stories are influenced by folklore and mythology, enhanced by illustrations scattered throughout. It's a visually stimulating book with a memorable, unique storytelling voice that would be of particular interest to young readers struggling with coming-of-age issues.



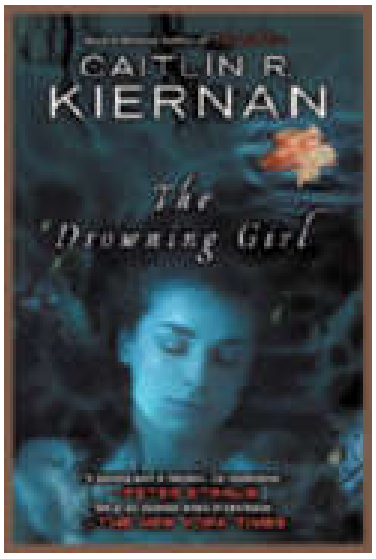
37. Oregon: *Girl in the Creek* by Wendy N. Wagner (they/them) – An atmospheric and eerie story about a PNW forest that seems to devour all who enter. It takes place specifically in Faraday, Oregon, in the foot-hills of Mount Hood. We have missing persons, fungi, and spores … and maybe a serial killer on the loose and a police investigation.



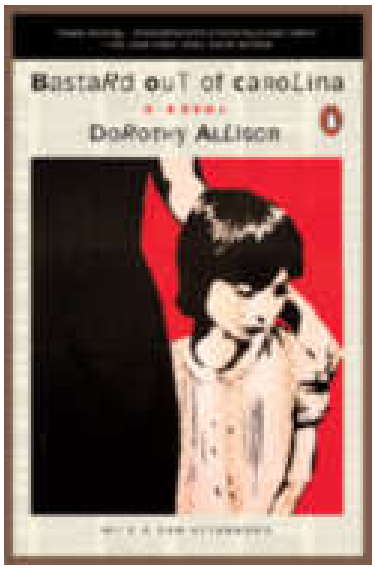
38. Pennsylvania: *The Low, Low Woods* by Carmen Maria Machado – I read this limited-run comic book series on hoopla. It takes place in the fictional town of Shudder-to-Think, Pennsylvania, a strange rural small town plagued by an illness that devours memories. The two main characters, best friends El and Vee, seem to be newly afflicted, and they go on a journey to get answers before it's too late.



39. Rhode Island: *The Drowning Girl* by Caitlín R. Kiernan – I think this is my favorite Kiernan work after enjoying a few others more recently. A schizophrenic young woman becomes obsessed with a painting. The story is told as a memoir recording her haunting. Because of the narrator's mental illness, there are layers of psychological trauma creating a barrier between fact and fiction. Readers will be unsure how much of her story is true and what are just the ramblings of a claustrophobic, chaotic mind. Not all of it worked for me but some of the more chilling moments are extremely memorable.



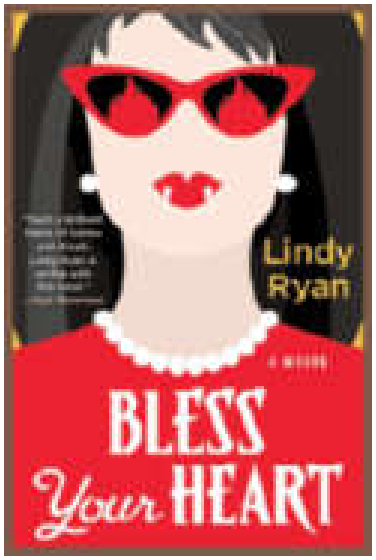
40. South Carolina: *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison – In the same way I recommend *Betty* by Tiffany McDaniel, I present to you its cousin book, *Bastard Out of Carolina.* I will be annoyed if you read one and not the other. They remind me so much of each other. In this semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story, we follow a girl known simply as Bone, born in poverty, sexually and physically assaulted, and just trying to survive to grow up and become a gospel singer. Not horror necessarily, but horrific, with themes of family, survival, overcoming trauma and hardship, and the beauty in perseverance.



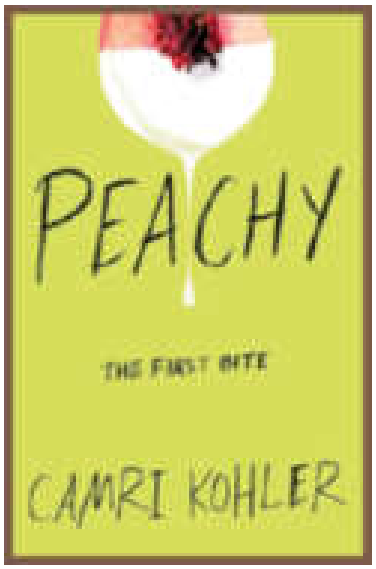
41. South Dakota: *Tinfoil Butterfly* by Rachel Eve Moulton – The main character, Emma Powers, lives life on the edge. She has a traumatic past that is communicated through flashbacks that are increasingly more revealing as her story unfolds. We meet her in a van with some sketchy dude named Lowell. They are headed toward the Badlands in the Black Hills. Things take a dark turn, and Emma is stranded in the middle of nowhere. She makes her way to a desolate little town where she meets a creepy child named Earl, who is wearing a homemade mask. Earl leads her into the woods where things get weird. This is one of those books where you finish and stare at the wall for like an hour. You should read it so we can talk about it.

42. Tennessee: *Whispers in the Dark* by Laurel Hightower – This book was my introduction to Laurel Hightower's storytelling, and it is her debut novel. It's about a woman named Rose, who is a streetsmart, tough-as-nails, Memphis SWAT sniper, hiding a secret from her peers. For as long as she can remember, Rose has been haunted by what she calls, The Whispers. They have ruined her life and made her question her own sanity. She's barely able to keep it together when tragedy strikes and sets off a chain of events that will threaten to break her already fragile mental state. It's truly high-stakes, psychological, and paranormal horror.

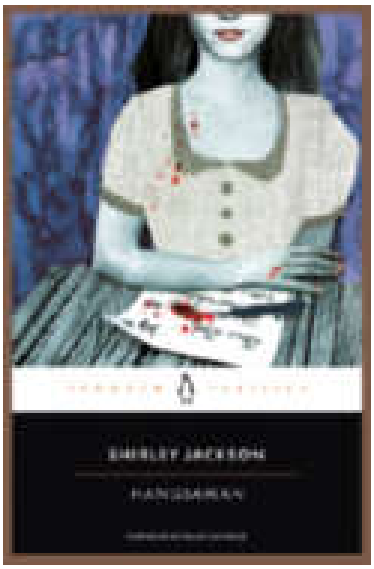
43. Texas: *Bless Your Heart* by Lindy Ryan – Set in a small, Southern town where everyone knows everything about everyone else and people are wrapped up in appearances—especially the women who are expected to always have their shit together and mind their manners. The main character balances the truth of who she is with the weight of who her mother wants her to be and who the town says she is. The themes of weaponizing religion and morality to keep people in line resonated with me.



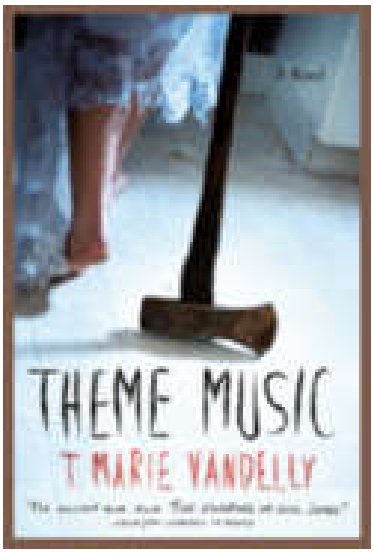
44. Utah: *Peachy* by Camri Kohler – This book is about a young woman who feels an overwhelming amount of pressure to conform to a high standard of beauty and performance. As the ideal becomes more and more difficult to maintain, Peach goes through a horrific transformation and completely loses control of herself. It's a cautionary tale about the dangers of society having too much influence on young women to all look and act the same no matter how unachievable the standard is and without any care for who they are as a person.



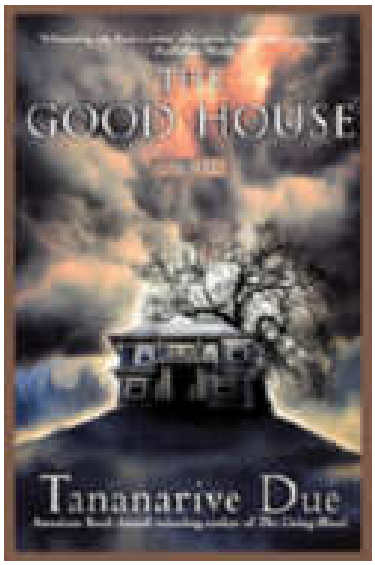
45. Vermont: *Hangsaman* by Shirley Jackson – This dark tale blurs the line between reality and illusion. Natalie Waite is a young woman leaving home for college, standing on the precipice of adulthood but unsure of her own identity apart from her family. It's the story of a woman losing her grip on reality, falling deeper and deeper into isolation and the slow, sinister unraveling of a mind riddled with crippling self-doubt. It reminded me of Plath's *The Bell Jar*, but the storytelling is more of a fever dream and less introspective.



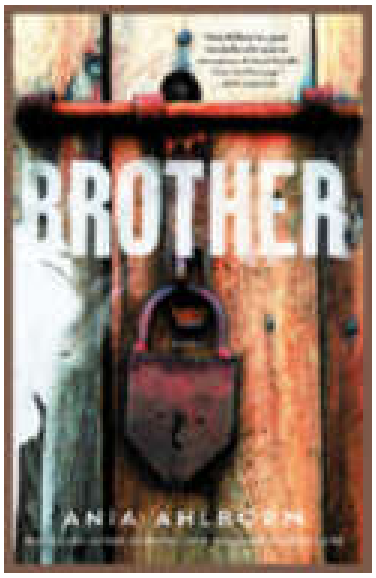
46. Virginia: *Theme Music* by T. Marie Vandelly – Okay, hear me out. I didn't love this book for many reasons, but that doesn't mean I can't recommend it. Despite the issues I had with this book, it also has personality, and I listened to the entire audiobook, which was at least eleven hours, so it has something going on that you might enjoy. It's the story of a young woman who moves into the house where she grew up and where her father massacred her entire family in front of her. She immediately begins to see the ghosts of her dead relatives as she makes herself comfortable in the local murder house. She makes friends with the retired homicide detective who worked on her family's case, an old flame who was a family friend, and the nice new neighbors.



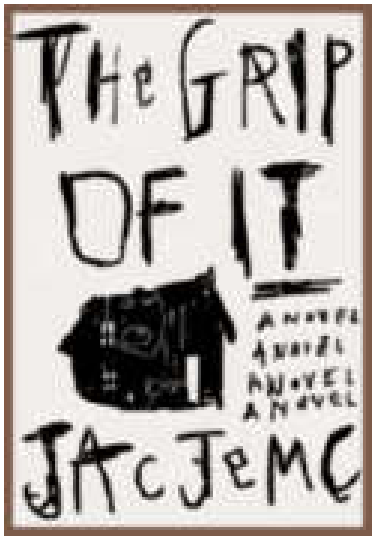
47. Washington: *The Good House* by Tananarive Due – This book is rich with cultural, ancestral magic and the larger-than-life personality of the main protagonist, Angela Toussaint. *The Good House* explores classic haunted house tropes, such as family curses, malevolent forces, and grief, with cultural elements of African spiritual practices and superstitions. Full of supernatural and paranormal terror paired with unpredictable family drama, these elements create a suspenseful tension that lasts throughout the whole novel.



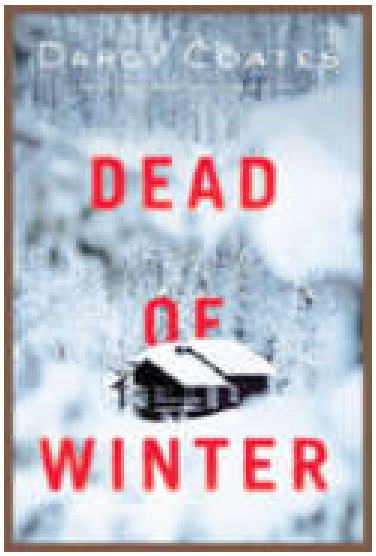
48. West Virginia: *Brother* by Ania Ahlborn – This was my introduction to Ania Ahlborn, and it knocked me on my horror-loving ass. I honestly had no knowledge of horror written by women apart from Anne Rice at the time. Then, after a few years on #bookstagram, I see this book about an Appalachian family kidnapping young women and doing terrible things to them in their basement. My mind was blown. I dove into her back catalog of books and have been a huge fan ever since.



49. Wisconsin: *The Grip of It* by Jac Jemc – This is not your average haunted house story. *The Grip of It* doesn't rely on jump scares or creaky floorboards. The horror seeps into a married couple's lives in a far more subtle, insidious way. Readers will find their nerves frayed in a heightened sense of paranoia and a slow-building sense of dread. Not all of your questions will get answered, so prepare yourself to be left with an unsettling, lingering feeling that this cautionary tale rests in a state of eternal imbalance.



50. Wyoming: *Dead of Winter* by Darcy Coates – Horror readers who love stories of isolation and survival will enjoy finding a snowbound lodge filled with strangers with one person who wants to make sure nobody gets out alive. This one gave me sweet, sweet Agatha Christie vibes. I love the author's ability to plot intricate mysteries while keeping a brisk pace.



Women of Splatterpunk

Splatterpunk and extreme horror are closely related but there is a significant difference that's good to know. I wrote an article for the magazine *FANGORIA* about this topic because I was confused about when to categorize a work as "extreme" and when it should be identified as splatterpunk. I interviewed various industry veterans

and seasoned professionals, and the boiled down version of their individual answers was this: All horror that utilizes graphic and explicit violent content can be labeled as “extreme” in general, but not all extreme horror is splatterpunk if it doesn’t also include a satirical or subversive element—a real “punk rock” vibe.

I mostly read extreme horror in 2020 due to the pandemic. There was something cathartic and comforting to reading stories about fictional people going through trials and tragedy worse than what we were all experiencing during a troubling time confined in our homes doomscrolling social media and news outlets. The remarkable thing about quality splatterpunk is the skill of the author to bring readers into all the gruesome chaos and violence and make them enjoy the harrowing ride without begging to get off. You must read these stories responsibly and be mindful of content. Many of these books contain extreme violence, explicit sexual situations, and graphic imagery. I’ve done my best to make sure you go in prepared but not spoiled on plot details. Enter this reading list at your own risk.

Book Vibrations: *body horror, disturbing, gore, graphic imagery, killing spree, murder, psychic trauma, revenge, unhinged behavior, violence, women fighting back*

Maeve Fly

CJ Leede
TOR NIGHTFIRE | 2023 | 288 PAGES

On a basic level, this is the story of a young woman in Los Angeles on a dark path to madness. At first blush, she seems like such a plain Jane, almost wholesome—she works at a theme park in a princess costume by day with her best friend and is a live-in caretaker for her grandmother. At night, they go out. Nothing too out of the ordinary but there are some red flags. Her best friend's brother comes on the scene and flips a switch in Maeve's life that changes everything.

My Thoughts: I was not expecting this book to be so full-on or as addictive. I could see where this story was going to veer off the rails and into the weeds, but there was nothing I could do to stop reading. This debut book is so compelling! It's a dangerous dive into the mind of a deranged lunatic coming into her power through acts of unfiltered sexual exploits, graphic violence, and homicidal mania. *Maeve Fly* is a dark comedy that is wildly entertaining as much as it is deeply disturbing.

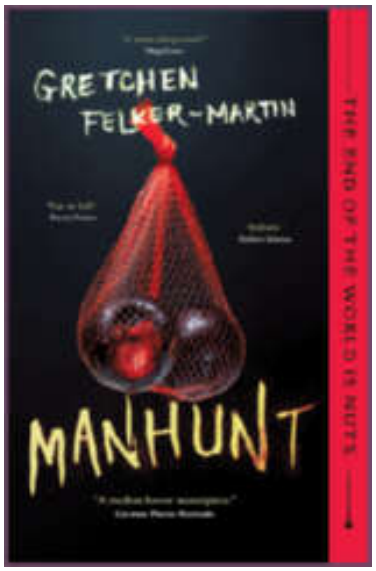
RED STATION

Kenzie Jennings
DEATH'S HEAD PRESS | 2020 | 146 PAGES

The Red Station is a welcome sight for weary travelers who need a good night's sleep and a meal. Four stagecoach passengers stop there for the evening only to discover that they will have to fight to stay alive.

My Thoughts: Clyde Northway, "The Woman in the Red Dress," is worth the price of admission here. This character is so badass. The landscape is perfectly painted, the dialogue sets the scene, and then all at once, Kenzie Jennings demonstrates her vivid imagination with the chops to write action sequences in cinematic detail. The way this story winds up to deliver its punches is a masterclass in building suspense. Once you start, you won't be able to put this down.

MANHUNT



Gretchen Felker-Martin
TOR NIGHTFIRE | 2022 | 304 PAGES

In Felker-Martin's unique vision, the apocalypse takes the form of a plague that ravages those with high testosterone, transforming them into feral, primal creatures driven by nothing but instinct: sex, eat, kill, repeat. The survivors fracture into splintered factions, each clinging to different philosophies of survival setting the stage for a brutal and dynamic postapocalyptic landscape. It's familiar territory reimagined, with every trope subverted and rebuilt from the ground up.

My Thoughts: Told through multiple perspectives, this story requires close attention to the sprawling cast and moving parts. These aren't hollow stereotypes or vehicles for plot fodder; they are true-to-life, messy human beings forced to grapple with their identities and traumas in a world stripped of all civility and creature comforts. The plague reshapes gender roles and sexual dynamics in ways that are both refreshing and challenging. It's unabashedly queer, unapologetically explicit, and unrelentingly violent. Felker-Martin doesn't miss an opportunity to horrify and provoke. There are shining moments of humor and humanity reminding readers what's worth fighting for in this splintered world. It's a testament to

Felker-Martin's skill that the novel can be both fun and deeply fucked up at the same time.

Go Down Hard

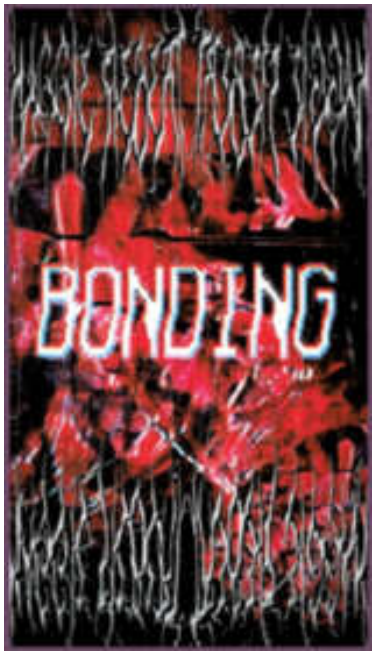
Ali Seay
GRINDHOUSE PRESS | 2020 | 166 PAGES

Meg has been vulnerable and victimized. Her coping mechanism is to advocate for and personally avenge women by acting on their behalf. She plays a deadly game with known predatory men, leading them into her murder den and taking them out before they have a chance to ruin someone's life. Meg is always winning until she crosses paths with Jack, a serial killer with his own murder den right next door.

My Thoughts: When I first read the synopsis, I remember thinking, "I hope it's just like this. I hope it's exactly what I'm showing up for." It's hard to tell what you're really getting into with extreme or splatterpunk horror. Sometimes it goes too far or crosses over into ridiculous or over-the-top gore and violence; but *Go Down Hard* delivers on its promises. It's playful, unflinching, and just the right

amount of sexual tension. The dialogue between the two main characters, the back-and-forth narratives, and short chapters make this a one-sitting read. Very hard to put down (so I didn't).

BONDING



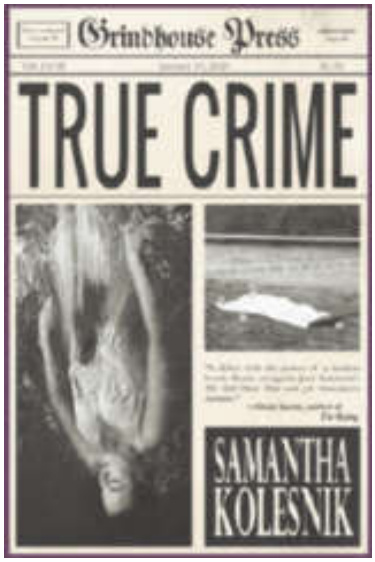
Maggie Siebert
APOCALYPSE PARTY | 2021 | 140 PAGES

Bonding *is a short story collection under two hundred pages from an author who enjoys exploring the dark side of human behaviors.*

My Thoughts: There is something for everyone here: fans of body horror, apocalypses, occupational hazards, satire, office drama, grief horror, and psychological terror. I would not recommend this to anyone who is sensitive about visceral, descriptive language or has a weak constitution. A few of these stories contain disturbing imagery involving animals. Don't miss this one if you're tired of seeing the

same recommendations from the same splatterpunk authors. This one is unique.

True Crime



Samantha Kolesnik
OFF LIMITS PRESS LLC | 2020 | 156 PAGES

Siblings Suzy and Lim escape their abusive mother when they kill her in an act of self-preservation. This sends the two into a kind of manic killing spree, during which Suzy especially descends into madness.

My Thoughts: *True Crime* by Samantha Kolesnik is a brutal, unforgettable experience that strips away all pretense and exposes the raw, unsettling realities of trauma and violence. This isn't a comfortable read. Rooted in the kind of human darkness we often turn away from, Kolesnik's prose is precise and cutting. She draws you into the lives of her flawed, damaged characters with an honesty that feels intrusive. If you're looking for a story that challenges you, *True Crime* is essential reading.

Dawn of the Living Impaired and Other Messed-Up Zombie Stories

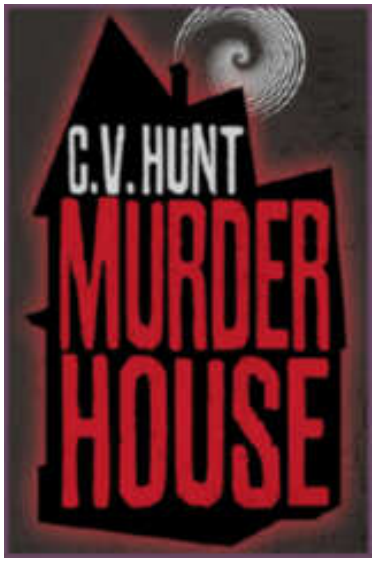
Christine Morgan
DEATH'S HEAD PRESS | 2019 | 172 PAGES

Blending humor, terror, and heart so no two stories feel alike, these nine short stories are done in a variety of styles and offer wildly inventive takes on the zombie genre that are anything but ordinary. From hilarious to hideous, each story is different in a thrilling way. This collection has something to satisfy every kind of zombie fan.

My Thoughts: Christine Morgan offers horror readers a banquet of zombie tales ranging in tone, style, and substance. Morgan has a knack for cinematic, vivid storytelling with detailed descriptions that bring every harrowing scene to life in the reader's mind. This is a solid recommendation for readers looking for quality work in the splatterpunk space. Morgan is a talented author; she cares for the reader by giving them something to cling to, characters to invest in, a story to follow—she doesn't add or take away without purpose or

intention to serve the story. If you love zombie horror (and even if you don't, this might change your mind) this is quintessential.

Murder House



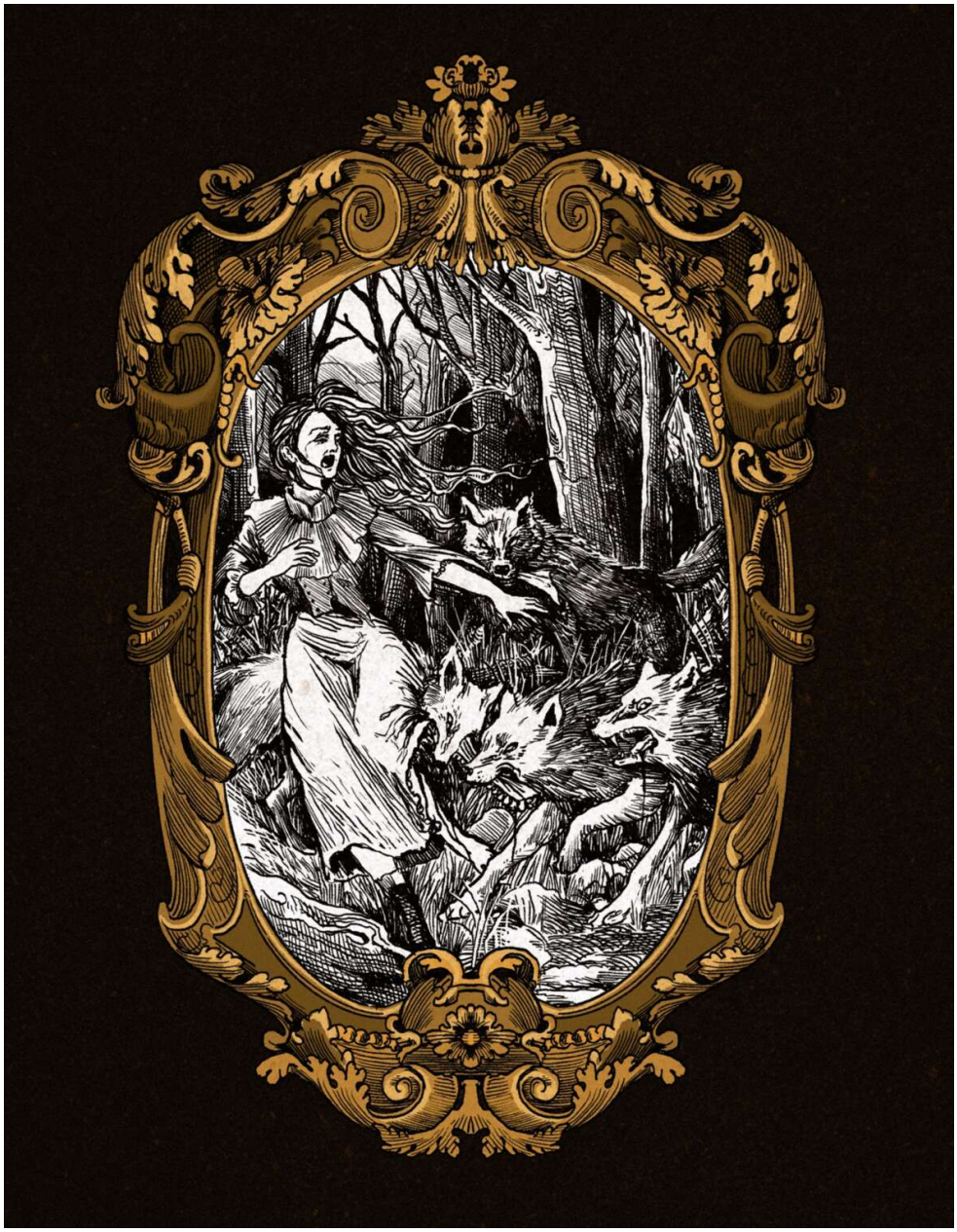
C. V. Hunt (they/them)
ATLATL PRESS | 2020 | 128 PAGES

A couple moves into a house well-known in the neighborhood for being the house where a grisly crime was committed. Brent is a struggling, desperate writer trying to resurrect his career by writing a true crime novel about the Hallows' Eve Massacre that took place where they now live. He's on a deadline, stressed, and he's an asshole to his girlfriend Laura who has been nothing but supportive. His behavior toward her seems more hostile than usual, and she is starting to experience things that may or may not be real.

My Thoughts: Hunt's work is not going to be for everyone. It's unpredictable and a little uncomfortable, but I love it. I enjoy the way Hunt challenges readers to accept atypical responses from their characters during times of escalating chaos or violence. It's kind of

their signature move. The tropes might be familiar but everything else is going to come at you sideways. Obviously, tread carefully when trying C. V. Hunt's work for the first time; *Murder House* is the most palatable, I believe, but even still—it's not your garden variety "let's see what happens when we move into a crime scene" kind of horror book.

What Women Say About Femicide in Latin America Through Horror Fiction



This is the heaviest list in this book. The books featured all deal with highly sensitive subjects, so I want to fully warn against jumping into it without reading my content warnings. These books include domestic violence and the dark side of family life behind closed doors, generational trauma, child abuse, graphic/explicit scenes of sexual assault, femicide in Latin America, gruesome and realistic stories of everyday violence against the vulnerable and defenseless (children, animals, women, elderly), misogynistic/patriarchal oppression and violence, and psychic trauma.

If you're feeling bold and brave and enjoy learning about the horrors women face in other countries through the fictional stories they tell, these translated tales are for you. If reading these profoundly disturbing acts is too much to handle, I urge you to just skip this list altogether. The books on this list are a comprehensive collective work of talented women who bravely challenge the patriarchy and misogyny with loud voices, working to have the legacy of violence against women in their country exposed for the world to see. Literature that can't be ignored and must be endured.

> **Book Vibrations:** *"Maybe that's your mission. To gather the bones of dead women, to piece them together and tell their stories, and then to let them run free."* —Reservoir Bitches *by Dahlia de la Cerda*

Cockfight

María Fernanda Ampuero (2018) translated by Frances Riddle
THE FEMINIST PRESS | 2020 | 128 PAGES | ECUADOR

With striking and provocative prose, Ampuero explores themes of violence toward women and young girls within the context of family. Coming-of-age stories detail the vulnerability of youth, generational trauma, and the harsh reality that sometimes home is the most unsafe place to be.

My Thoughts: Three words describe this collection: visceral, unapologetic, and unrelenting. I read in an interview featured in Words Without Borders© that Ampuero scrubbed the stories of any geographical reference so that all readers could look inward and see the universal truths depicted in these stories—that the vulnerable aren't safe anywhere. This was not an easy collection to endure—the graphic and explicit acts of violence are at a ten with a variety of abuse ranging from psychological and verbal to physical and sexual, often leading to murder.

Ampuero's storytelling is so magnetic, it's difficult to set the book down, even if you want to. Let me urge readers to try to endure. Even though the prevailing mood is hopelessness and dread, even

though the stories are so brutal and ugly to look at, ask yourself if reading it is a small price to pay for the sake of knowledge that these things do happen and we can bear witness in this way, as readers.

Human Sacrifices

María Fernanda Ampuero (2021) translated by Frances Riddle
THE FEMINIST PRESS | 2023 | 144 PAGES | ECUADOR

A short story collection, Human Sacrifices *centers on women's experiences in Latin America—specifically, violence against women. The stories range in style and tone and subject matter but share common themes: girls coming of age in unsafe living conditions with predatory adult figures in their lives, classism, patriarchal and religious oppression, sexism, and femicide.*

My Thoughts: Just like Ampuero's first collection, *Cockfight,* these stories are graphic and explicit. Told primarily as first-person

narratives, the reader shares an intimate journey through trauma with each of the main characters in every harrowing tale. One of the major differences between the two short story collections is *Human Sacrifices* feels more cinematic, like little horror movies, while *Cockfight* is more literary. It needs to be said again: Both books are extremely graphic and do not pull any punches when it comes to explicit violence, so read at your own discretion.

HURRICANE SEASON

Fernanda Melchor (2017) translated by Sophie Hughes
NEW DIRECTIONS | 2020 | 224 PAGES | MEXICO

A rural Mexican village is the scene of a woman's murder, when she is accused of being a witch. Several villagers tell the story, which is inspired by a true headline according to the author.

My Thoughts: Reading this book was an emotional rollercoaster. At first, I listened to the audiobook and the first fifteen to twenty percent or so was so shocking—I couldn't believe what I was

hearing. Details so abrasive, I was laughing out loud. And I loved the cultural descriptions, essence of mythology, and folklore. Then I realized there are several shifts in the narration. So that initial vibe I was feeling quickly dissolved into a more bleak, morose mood that ultimately transformed into pitch-black darkness. This book is so traumatizing. I do recommend the audiobook for three reasons. First, so that you can hear the proper accent and pronunciations of names and places. Second, the stream of consciousness style prose is easier to listen to than it is to read—reading it can be emotionally challenging. And third, it was the only way to get a sense of personality/humanity … to hear the narrator gave some feeling to an otherwise cold and sparse storytelling style. I remember thinking there is not one person in this book with any kind of moral compass. Everyone is bad. Everything is brutal, abusive, violent, or depraved. Which is likely the point, honestly. It's a hurricane of chaos and violence.

Reservoir Bitches

Dahlia de la Cerda (2019) translated by Heather Cleary and Julia Sanches
SCRIBE | 2024 | 192 PAGES | MEXICO

This book is a collection of stories centered on the experience of being a woman in Mexico. The stories cover feminine rage, feral girls running wild, the girlfriends of narcos, sex workers, victims of violence, and femicide. Themes you'll encounter include girlhood, motherhood, marriage, sex work, abortion, poverty, murder, sexual abuse, trauma, and female friendships.

My Thoughts: This is one hell of an intense debut. I remember my time with it like it was tattooed on my body. The overwhelming sense of sadness surrounding the stories of women forced to endure hardship and trauma as a normal way of life is so haunting. Once readers allow their eyes to pour over the words on these pages, they can never be taken back. It's devastating and yet … powerful. There is power in someone telling these stories so that the message is translated, shared, and memorialized in the collective hearts of readers who will open themselves up to the heartbreak. One of the stories toward the end mentions the next story on this list, so I had to read it as well.

Dead Girls

Selva Almada (2014) translated by Annie McDermott
CHARCO PRESS | 2020 | 146 PAGES | ARGENTINA

Creating a book that defies genre, Selva Almada narrates the cases of three teenage girls murdered in a small town in the '80s. A hybrid of true crime, journalistic fiction, and meta storytelling, this book reminds me of Truman Capote's In Cold Blood.

My Thoughts: *Dead Girls* is an impactful work of fiction that reads like true crime. The words are like ghosts that will haunt me forever. Almada doesn't just recount the facts; she delves into the societal indifference and systemic failures that allow femicide in Latin America to persist.

"I didn't know a woman could be killed simply for being a woman …"

Women are not only unsafe outside, alone, or in the dark, but also in their own homes and at the hands of those who are supposed to care for them.

"My house, any teenager's house, wasn't really the safest place in the world. You could be killed inside your own home. Horror could live with you, under your roof."

This book highlights that the authorities in place justify their negligence by highlighting the presumed criminal activities of victims.

“No human being is less important than the worst thing they’ve ever done.”

Truly one of the most eye-opening and harrowing accounts of domestic violence I’ve ever read. Not just because of the human acts of cruelty, but also for the lack of concern for missing and murdered women in Latin America.

Vista Chinesa

Tatiana Salem Levy (2021) translated by Alison Entrekin
SCRIBE | 2023 | 144 PAGES | BRAZIL

Vista Chinesa *is based on a true story about a woman who deviates from her normal routine one time and winds up face-to-face with the devil. The aftermath of this encounter is a harrowing journey.*

My Thoughts: One of the most realistic portrayals of life immediately experienced after sexual assault, the narrative is part true crime, part thriller, and part journalistic fiction reminiscent of *Dead Girls* by Selva Almada. The author based this book on a friend's real-life account of her sexual assault. Vista Chinesa is the location where it happened in Rio de Janeiro. A horrific, heartbreaking story, this tale centers on the female experience, thoughts on motherhood, pregnancy, and marriage, as well as overcoming adversity and a close examination of criminal justice, shoddy police work, and wrongful convictions.

Please tread carefully: There are detailed descriptions of assault, sexual assault, physical violence, reporting sexual assault, post-trauma, and suicidal ideation.

Short Story Collections I Love with My Whole Heart & Highly Recommend

I have read so many short story collections (single author) and anthologies (multiple authors) because it is my preferred way to find new favorite authors. I believe that short fiction is the best representation of the full spectrum of storytelling offered by an author. As an example, *Ghost Summer* by Tananarive Due showcases her ability to write quality stories in a wide variety of subgenres, including fantasy, horror, science fiction, apocalyptic, and coming-of-age. You can read all the stories to determine which ones appeal to you the most, then choose one of her novels in the same subgenre. The stories under the heading "Gracetown" in *Ghost Summer* were some of my favorites from the whole collection. Her novel, *The Reformatory*, is set in the same fictional town in Florida and deals with similar themes. Here are more short story collections I have loved over the years. You can find my review for every title on Goodreads.

- *A Dream of a Woman* by Casey Plett
- *And Her Smile Will Untether the Universe* by Gwendolyn Kiste
- *Bad Dolls* by Rachel Harrison
- *Breakable Things* by Cassandra Khaw (they/them)
- *Cruel Works of Nature* by Gemma Amor
- *Cry Your Way Home* by Damien Angelica Walters
- *Everything That's Underneath* by Kristi DeMeester
- *Falling in Love with Hominids* by Nalo Hopkinson
- *I Do Not Apologize for My Position on Men* by Rae Wilde

- *Man Made Monsters* by Andrea L. Rogers
- *Mists and Megaliths* by Catherine McCarthy
- *Nineteen Claws and a Blackbird* by Agustina Bazterrica
- *Out of Aztlan* by V. Castro
- *Out of Water* by Sarah Read
- *She Said Destroy* by Nadia Bulkin
- *Sing Your Sadness Deep* by Laura Mauro (they/them)
- *Something Borrowed, Something Blood-Soaked* by Christa Carmen
- *Sometimes We're Cruel and Other Stories* by J. A. W. McCarthy
- *Spook Lights: Southern Gothic Horror* by Eden Royce
- *The Dangers of Smoking in Bed* and *Things We Lost in the Fire* by Mariana Enríquez
- *The Ghost Sequences* by A. C. Wise
- *The Hotel* by Daisy Johnson
- *The Tricker-Treater and Other Stories* by Briana Morgan
- *The Wishing Pool* and *Ghost Summer* by Tananarive Due
- *Unfortunate Elements of My Anatomy* by Hailey Piper
- *Velocities* by Kathe Koja
- *We Are Here to Hurt Each Other* by Paula D. Ashe (they/them)

On Feminist Fiction

By Alexis Henderson

Since the dawn of writing—as an art form and a practice—women have been telling stories about the harrowing realities of our existence. We disguise the dark truths of our lives—our private traumas and secret grief—in fairy tales and myths. We write horror because we live alongside horror every day: We alert friends before a first date (or a second … or third), walk home with our keys sheathed between our knuckles. We compile documentation in a folder entitled *In Case I Go Missing,* a grim imagining of what the world would look like after we're gone, how we can bring our own lives to justice after we're dead. As women, we face the possibility of our own destruction as a matter of daily habit.

When women write, these mundane horrors make for compelling stories and when these stories are expanded into books and published for the masses, they are often labeled "feminist." But as more authors and readers have embraced that moniker, an interesting discourse has begun. Books that are published as "feminist novels" or "feminist retellings" are handled with a new level of skepticism by both readers and critics who often question whether a certain work is "feminist enough" to deserve the label. This discourse often spirals into a series of (rather predictable) questions:

Can a book be considered feminist if its central character doesn't uphold feminist ideas? Is suffering under patriarchy—or struggling to survive it—enough to define a feminist novel no matter what the character in question chooses to do, what ideals they choose to uphold? Is a woman writing a book an inherently feminist act? Can someone who identifies as a male write a feminist novel, if the theme of their story and the character it centers upon upholds

feminist ideals? Can an author—woman or otherwise—write a feminist story by happenstance, even if they personally do not uphold feminist doctrines? Or is a feminist book simply a text that women enjoy and feel empowered by regardless of the intentions behind the story?

I think these criticisms and the defenses of books that often follow can all be boiled down to a simple question: *What is a feminist novel?*

It's an interesting question, but what I find more compelling are the books that sit at the center of this discourse because, in my experience, these books are typically authored by women. Men, I've noticed, are very noticeably absent from these discussions. Even when men write compelling narratives centering on women, stories that grapple with feminist themes, I notice that their books are very rarely examined with the same rigor.

I want to be clear: This is not the same as saying that men's books aren't deemed misogynistic. That's not true at all. If you spend even a little time online in bookish spaces, you'll find a number of novels authored by men that have been labeled sexist, reductive, or otherwise offensive. The Bechdel test is very often applied to the work of male writers to assess how "feminist" they are or are not. But, in my experience, the tone is different. It's almost as though men are not expected to write feminist novels, so when they fall short of the label (even when they're not intending to) the response is different, somehow muted. Their own shortcomings aren't weighed against them as heavily in what seems to be a kind of shoulder-shrugging, "boys will be boys" response.

But women are held to a higher standard. We expect more from them. A man who writes an unfeminist novel is behaving in a way that's expected. A woman who writes an unfeminist novel is, to be a bit facetious, something of a traitor. This is a problem and it's one that women are forced to confront almost every time they come to the page.

It is also why, as an author and creative, I've shied away from dubbing my own work "feminist" because it began to feel less like a subgenre or theme and more like the confines of a structure that I agree with, as a movement and ethos, but creatively found limiting. The expectations of a feminist book weighed on me while I was writing. I found myself wondering if my characters were "empowered" enough to warrant a feminist label. If they were weak or strong. If they were good, or at the very least good enough to be likable to the people who were supposed to like them. After all, can a book be feminist if the main character it centers on is so bristly and monstrous that women don't even like her? I began to wonder if —within the context of writing and publishing—a feminist novel was simply one that centered on a woman who was noble (but not too much of a Mary Sue), strong (but never arrogant), and empowered (but not preachy) enough to be deemed well-liked.

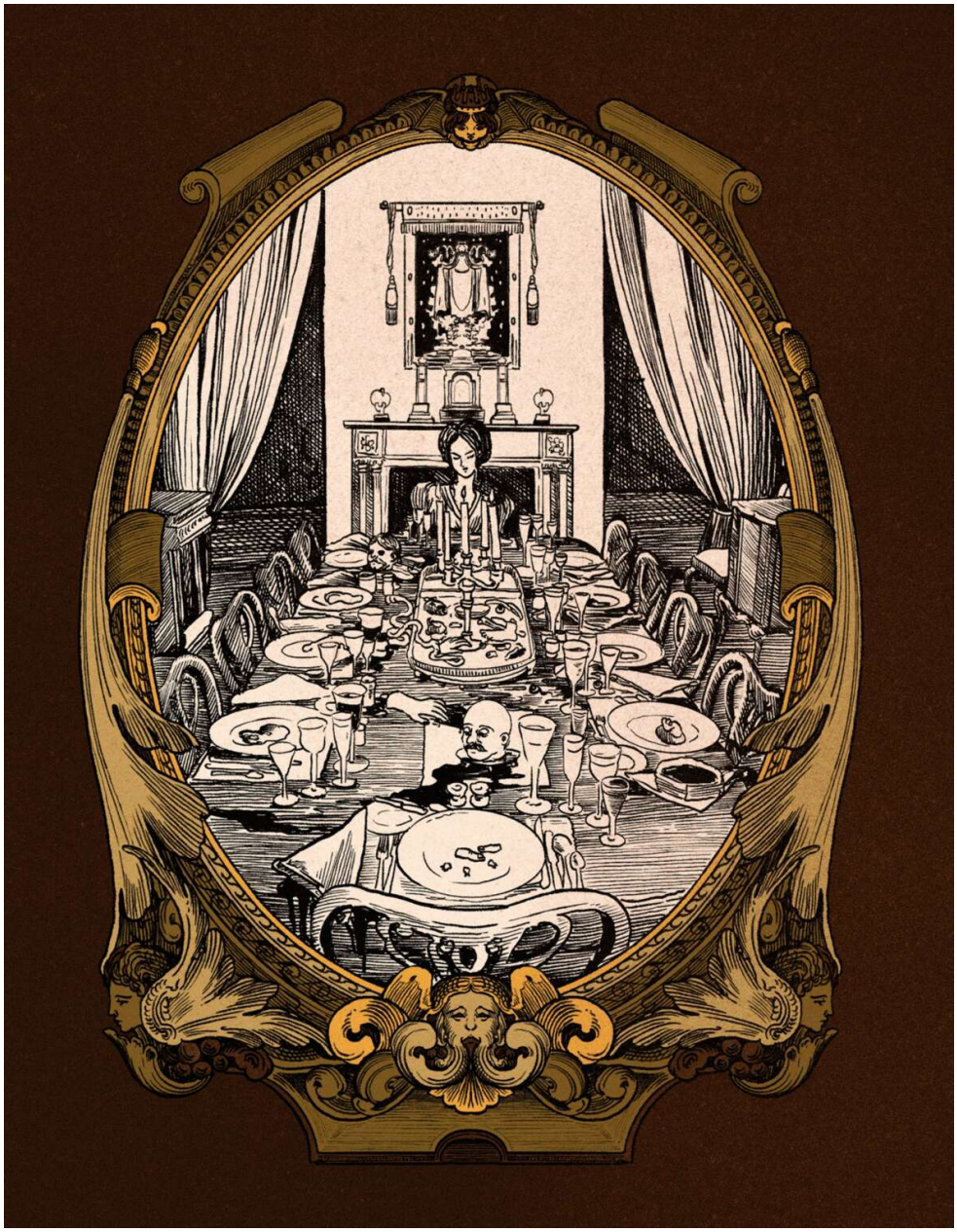
Creatively, this way of thinking proved to be something of a death knell. Every time I sat down at my desk and attempted to write I couldn't shake the feeling that the stories I was attempting to tell, and the women who populated them, just didn't feel real. I realized that this was because (in my admittedly limited experience) women who survive structures of oppression—like sexism, racism, transphobia, or the intersections between all three—are rarely reminiscent of the noble and almost eerily empowered characters we expect from "feminist" novels. The truth is this brutal world has a way of remaking women into what many may regard as monsters. Women filled with rage and spite, who refuse to make themselves more palatable to the very people that oppress them. And when I sat down at my writing desk, those monsters called to me in a twisted siren song imploring me to tell their stories. So, I did.

Through them—this coven of monstrous women shaped both by the brutality of their world and their own rage in response to it—I was forced to realize that my purpose as an author was not to write characters or stories that perfectly emblematize feminism. It was not to populate those stories with mouthpieces for feminism or

inspirational fodder to teach women how to be strong and noble, how to save themselves. Women are already strong and noble. Women save themselves every day. My role as an author is to subvert these schemas, to relinquish notions of rightness and respectability, and to instead write women as they really are. No shortcuts. No shying away from the trauma and monstrosity, the pain and the horror. No contorting characters to make them more likable or palatable, to curb criticism or curry favor. Just the simple act of writing the stories that all too often go untold.

Alexis Henderson is the speculative fiction author of *The Year of the Witching* and *An Academy for Liars.* When she's not writing, you'll find her hanging out with her cats or nursing a hot cup of tea.

Eat Your Vegetables

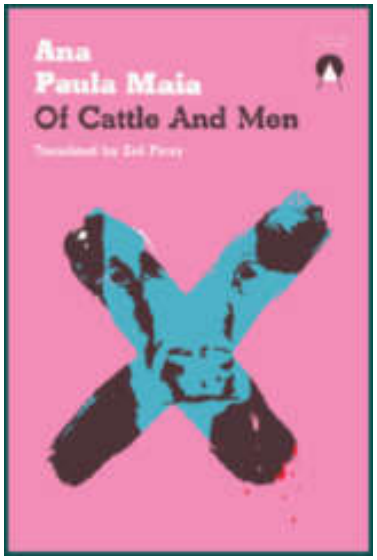


A powerful exercise is allowing fiction to inform, challenge, or influence our personal relationship to the subject matter. In this case, food—where it comes from, its cultural relevance, and the impact it has on our environment. Several of the books in this list explore the connective tissue between food and the relational and

psychological significance of sharing meals in community with our family and friends. Embarking on a reading journey like this is best enjoyed when you're in the mood for something thought-provoking and challenging to your worldview—or perhaps these stories will confirm what you already know in your heart to be true. Either way, after these books have been read, their message will not be forgotten.

Book Vibrations: *animals, bleak, butchery, cannibalism, dark desires, food, food restrictions, gruesome, heavy, hunger, madness, meat, meat processing, morbid, murder, obsession, patriarchy, predator/prey, psychological, queer, relationships, romance, shocking, slaughterhouses, thought-provoking, vegetarianism*

Of Cattle and Men

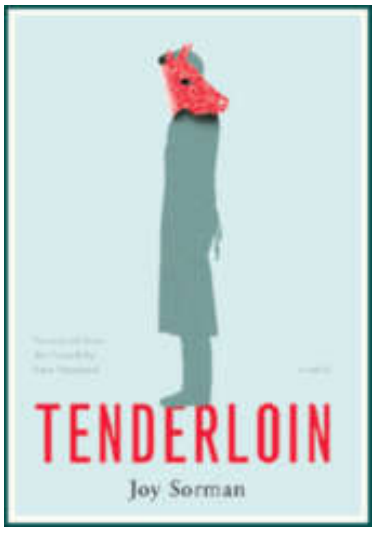


Ana Paula Maia (2013) translated by Zoë Perry
CHARCO PRESS | 2023 | 99 PAGES

The workers at a slaughterhouse located in a desolate rural place in Brazil are baffled when the cattle (and the workers) begin exhibiting strange fatalistic behaviors.

My Thoughts: I assume that most people don't want to read about the horrors of processing livestock into meat quickly and cheaply—a skeleton crew slaughtering animals day in and day out or the weight of violence and the smell of carrion on every page. But you don't read this book because you want to, you read it because life is asking a question that deserves an answer. Underneath the surface of everything going on between the men and these animals under their authority, is this grave understanding that we are what we eat. That which is carried out in brutality and graphic violence is what we put in our bellies. It's disturbing and convicting. And the answer will be different for every reader; there's no right or wrong way to feel about this book.

TENDERLOIN



Joy Sorman (2012) translated by Lara Vergnaud
RESTLESS BOOKS | 2024 | 176 PAGES

Pim is dedicated to the craft, the art, *of butchery. He dreams of owning a boutique butcher shop in Paris. You will join Pim on his journey to becoming an award-winning, notable butcher. You're with him as he carves, slices, and cleaves his way toward mastery. And you'll like Pim. He's ambitious and resourceful. The narrative is from his point of view and with it comes all of Pim's insecurities, musings, and convictions. You'll want to quit when Pim and his peers go to a slaughterhouse and endure an entire day of meat processing. Stay with it. The closer Pim gets to perfection in his butchering skills, the more restless he becomes. Something is missing. Pim longs to form a deeper connection between predator and prey and to strengthen the bond of our relationship to the animals we eat.*

My Thoughts: Honestly, this book changed me. Pim drills down into the essential purpose of butchering meat and how the meat production industry erased our connection to our food—hunting, gathering, and processing. We're all just consumers; meat has no value. It made me ask myself, "Would I kill and eat for myself?" The answer was, and still is, no. What will you decide?

TENDER IS THE FLESH

Agustina Bazterrica (2017) translated by Sarah Moses
SCRIBNER | 2020 | 224 PAGES

In a time that so closely resembles "right now," animals contract an infectious disease that is toxic to humans. Humans must avoid contact, which obviously includes eating them. Instead of a natural transition to plant-based diets, the government approves the consumption of "special meat"—human beings bred like animals for food.

My Thoughts: I read an article where Bazterrica revealed the inspiration for the book. Part of it was her rumination on the Hippocrates quote, "Let food be thy medicine and let medicine be thy food." The other part came from seeing meat hanging in a butcher shop and the thought popped into her head, "Why can't those be corpses? After all we are animals, we are flesh." A heavy observation, but one I have pondered as well. If this sounds wildly disturbing, it is. But Bazterrica's clinical, almost emotionally sterile narration is easy to digest and impossible to put down.

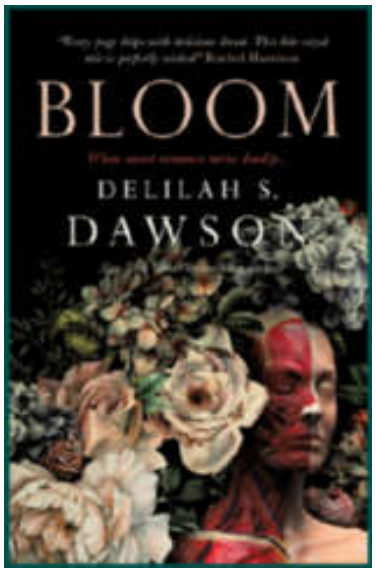
THE VEGETARIAN

Han Kang (2007) translated by Deborah Smith
HOGARTH | 2016 | 192 PAGES

The main character, Yeong-hye, has a dream so bloody and violent that she wakes up and decides to stop eating meat. Her husband sees her choice as a personal affront. He married her because she appeared to be docile, traditional, and ordinary. That's what he wants: a wife that is plain and submissive. When he's unable to convince her to give up her new plant-based life choice, he calls her family in to see if they can help. Yeong-hye's agency over her own body and health is relentlessly subverted and attacked by everyone she loves; meat is literally shoved into her mouth.

My Thoughts: *The Vegetarian* opened my eyes to how women are sometimes forced to give up control of everything—our bodies, our thoughts and opinions, moral convictions, and sometimes even the advocacy for healthcare and what we feel is best for us. This isn't your average "scary book," but trust me, it will crawl under your skin and burrow into your mind. It's a spiraling, out-of-control descent into the psychological and physical unraveling of a woman who dares to reject the life others have carved out for her. Yeong-Hye's transformation has a strange rippling effect on her family. I couldn't believe some of the things that come out of her husband's mouth, but even more disturbing are the toxic thoughts in his mind. He asks himself, "How did I not know this ordinary woman could be so … unreasonable?" The horror here is slow, deliberate, and deeply unsettling, rooted in themes of autonomy, human fragility, and repression.

BLOOM



Delilah S. Dawson
TITAN BOOKS | 2023 | 208 PAGES

This is a girl meets girl "meet-cute" with a dark twist. A woman at a farmer's market is selling the whole "cottagecore" lifestyle and catches the eye of the main character, Rosemary. The way to Rosemary's heart is with scrumptious cupcakes, handmade soaps, and other wholesome goodies. Rosemary keeps finding reasons to return to the farmer's market so she can interact with the woman again but soon, it's not enough—Rosemary needs to see Ash outside of their regular customer/shop owner relationship. One day, she surprises Ash at her home, hoping to deepen their intimacy—and it does, but not in the way Rosemary anticipated.

My Thoughts: Things move fast, and lots of red flags go ignored or dismissed but you, the reader, see everything clearly and it's so much fun. This will be a great palate cleanser mixed in with some of these heavier books. I like the way *Bloom* continues the conversation inspired by this list by highlighting organic food preparation to the extreme.

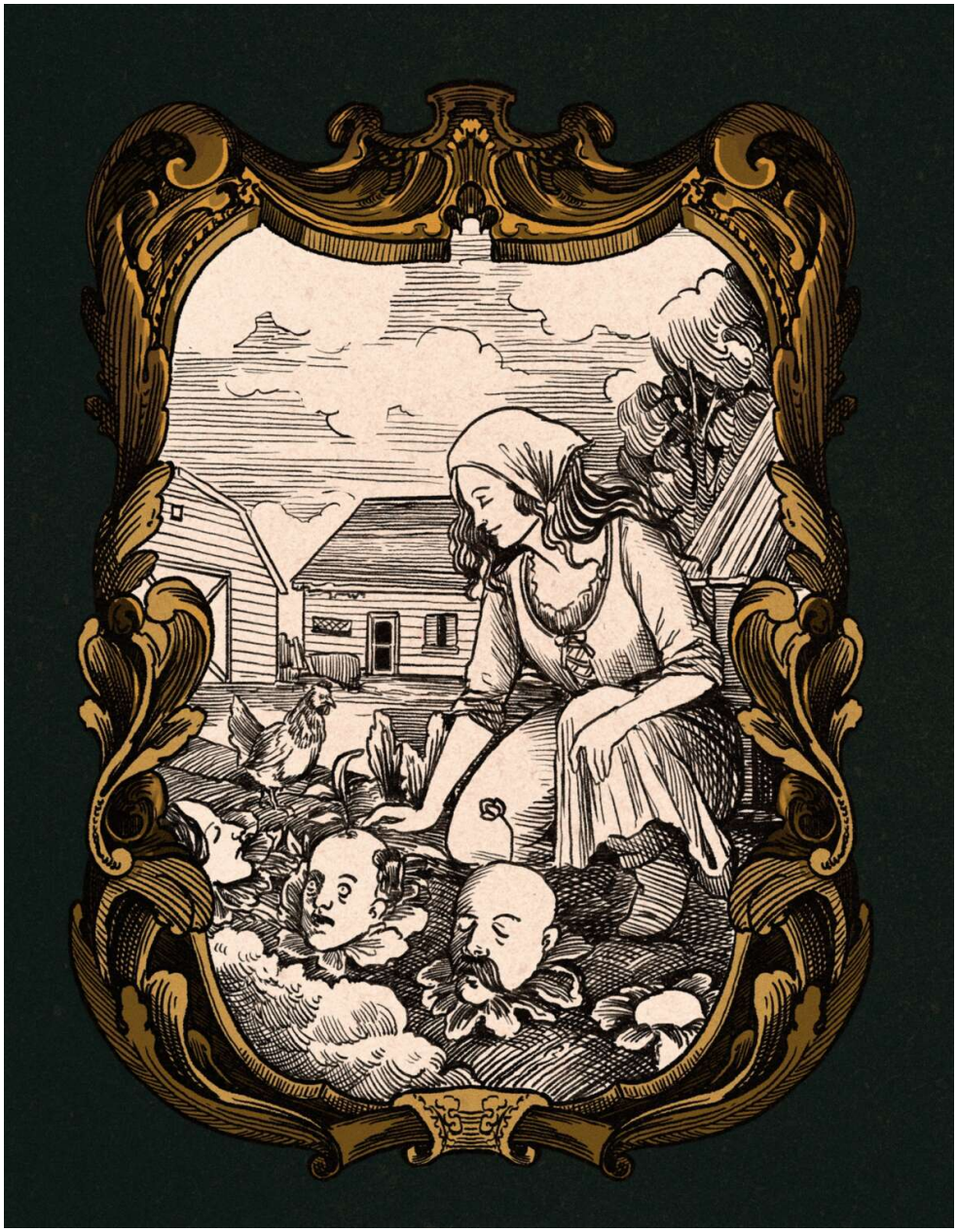
To Be Devoured

Sara Tantlinger (2019)
APOCALYPSE PARTY | 2023 | 90 PAGES

A woman named Andi is in a vulnerable headspace, struggling with grief and loss. She's in a relationship with a woman named Luna who seems like the perfect remedy—she's bright, loving, encouraging, and maybe the ray of sunshine someone like Andi needs in her life to chase away the doom and gloom. But for some reason, she becomes fixated on vultures, specifically the fact that they are carrion birds of prey feasting on the raw flesh of dead animals. Andi begins to wonder about the properties of blood, flesh, and consuming raw meat. What starts as just curiosity blooms into a full-blown appetite. She begins slipping down a dark, dark tunnel into madness and obsession.

My Thoughts: This book explores themes of food, body horror, strange obsessions, and shocking, revolting acts of madness and violence. The author's meticulous attention to detail and the intentional way she develops these characters and their relationship before introducing us to the conflict, raised the stakes high enough to penetrate past the page and into my heart for a deeply memorable reading experience.

On the Farm

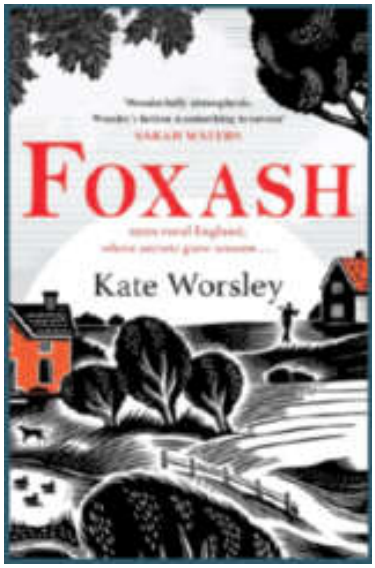


There are not enough horror books set on the farm. Give me a rural dirt road winding through prairie grass or a thicket that finally winds up at a crumbling estate or a dilapidated homestead. I want to see the characters getting up with the sun, working hard feeding the animals and mending the fences. There should be trouble afoot.

The animals should sense danger. The nearest town or village is miles and miles away. This is the perfect setting for horror. These books do it just right so thank goodness we do have a few. The vibes and the mood of reading these books together are so Gothic and dreadful … I would read this list in the fall/winter season.

Book Vibrations: *bad neighbors, betrayal, capable protagonists, disturbing, eerie, escalation, folk horror, Gothic, isolation, loneliness, rural settings, slow creeping dread, unsettling tone*

Foxash



Kate Worsley
TINDER PRESS | 2023 | 368 PAGES

As part of a government program to exchange hard labor for a plot of land and a place to live, a young couple, Lettie and Tommy, move to rural Essex to work at a farm next door to an established couple, Jean and Adam, who have been a part of the program for a while. As

everyone gets to know each other and settles into a routine, strange practices and secrets come to light.

My Thoughts: I need other readers to understand how deeply I invested in this story. We're working the land. Every day we plant crops, tend to livestock, and scrub the dirt from under our fingernails. I woke up each morning with Lettie and listened to her concerns and fears. She has all these doubts and needs, as well as a complicated relationship with her husband and neighbors. There is so much underlying dread! It's high stakes out there in rural Essex. This is the slowest burn of all slow burns, but nothing could pry me away from finding out what would happen. And things do happen. All I can say is this: I didn't know lettuce horror existed until I finished this book. I would say this is a mash-up of historical literature and folk horror, plus Gothic vibes. A deep sense of place, a dark and brooding atmosphere, and strong characters—I never wanted this book to end.

Residents of Honeysuckle Cottage

Elizabeth Davidson

SPOOKY HOUSE PRESS LLC | 2023 | 181 PAGES

Laura and Monique, a married couple, purchased a dilapidated farmhouse on some land in a rural area. Their new neighbors are creepy and off-putting. It seems like someone is threatening them to leave and Laura begins noticing changes in her wife's behavior. A discovery of regional folklore leads Laura to investigate their new community with an intense urgency.

My Thoughts: I show up to folk horror stories with strong expectations. There is a specific mood I crave. I want to be immersed in an intensely felt sense of dread. I want the characters to dismiss a lot of red-flag behavior exhibited by the community they want to belong to. I desire an escalation of horror—horror that doubles down. This book delivers on everything and then some, and Elizabeth Davidson does it in one hundred pages. It's a showcase of a capable author's skill in developing realistic characters readers can invest in right away so that when things start to go sideways, when the tension boils over, when the climax screams at full volume, readers feel it all.

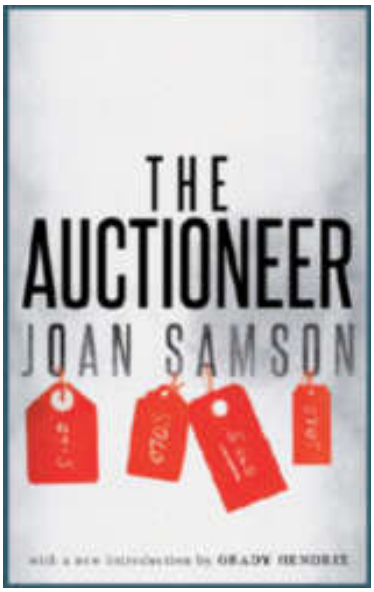
GHOST WALL

Sarah Moss
PICADOR | 2019 | 144 PAGES

Ghost Wall *is a coming-of-age tale peppered with dark, intimate snapshots of a complicated relationship between a daughter and her physically, verbally, and emotionally abusive father. The family secrets and dynamics come to light during a family vacation to the wilderness at an Iron Age reenactment anthropology field site. Silvie's family vacation takes a dark turn when it comes time to reenact a spiritual ritual involving human sacrifice.*

My Thoughts: I enjoyed the audiobook. The narrator has an appropriate accent since this book takes place in rural North England, and I love to have that layer of authenticity while I'm reading. I'm also a sucker for coming-of-age fiction; I'll read anything from any genre—Stephen King books trained me to seek out young protagonists and stories told from their points of view. *Ghost Wall* is adjacent to horror; it fits into a dark literary, feminist category, as it deals with an oppressive, patriarchal family culture and the confusing language of this love—sometimes sweet and nurturing, other times abusive to the point of violence. The scenes of young people diving into the reenactment of history and detailed descriptions of scenery complement this reading list on farming and living off the land so well.

THE AUCTIONEER



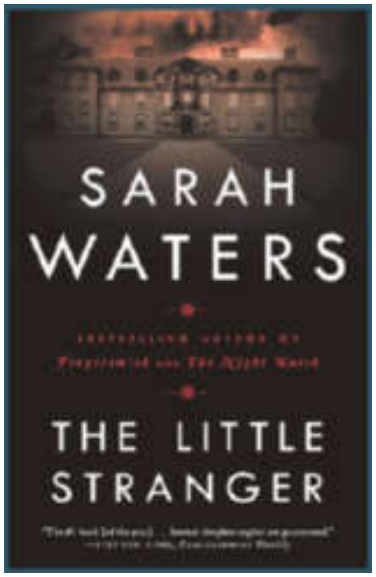
Joan Samson
VALANCOURT BOOKS | 1976 | 235 PAGES

A stranger happens upon a small, unassuming rural farm town and preys on the good people who live there, exploiting their kindness and naivete. This story begins with a subtle sense of dread that builds into a scream. The townsfolk are just trying to live their simple, honest lives when a charismatic auctioneer, Perly Dunsmore, shows up and changes everything. As Perly's ambitions grow, so do the stakes, and the entire town is drawn into a terrifying spiral of manipulation and deceit.

My Thoughts: Sometimes readers want a horror book that doesn't double down on gore or violence—a story that pokes holes in our faith in mankind but doesn't rely on gratuitous scenes of assault to expose the human monsters that lurk in shadows all around us. This is your book: a small town, psychological horror that brings the conflict slowly to a boil so that the characters don't even see it coming. I like to compare this one to Stephen King's *Needful Things* but with *Fargo* vibes. At just under two hundred and fifty pages, readers will make quick work of this book once they get sucked into the escalation. For fans of slow-burn psychological horror, this one is an absolute must-read. *The Auctioneer* doesn't just tell a story, it

holds a mirror up to our modern society and dares us to look. Nobody will like what they see.

The Little Stranger



Sarah Waters
RIVERHEAD | 2009 | 480 PAGES

A doctor is called out to see a patient at Hundreds Hall. The family works tirelessly to keep the farm going and the house from falling into disrepair. Working the hardest is the adult son, Rodney, who is injured in the war. Doctor Faraday offers to treat him free of charge and becomes a regular visitor and family friend. Rodney begins acting peculiar after a little girl is bitten in the face by the family dog. He's claiming there is something wicked in the house with them. Doctor Faraday and Rodney's sister, Caroline, are determined to find out what is really going on.

My Thoughts: This book is a little chewy in the sense that you must be in the mood for intricately and delicately written character development that happens slowly during carefully constructed scenes of, well, atmospheric dread in the mundane. In all honesty,

there were a few starts and stops for me as I discovered I wasn't in a patient "slow burning" mood to sit in the back seat of this tale and just enjoy the ride, but finally, I started it again on a surprise rainy day in August (2024) and was able to travel down the country roads to Hundreds Hall and sink into the disquiet of a family curse spilling over into the life of the unsuspecting good Doctor Faraday. My little note to you is this cryptic warning: Nothing is as it seems.

Swampcore & Sporror

Swampcore is a new favorite aesthetic. Picture wetlands as far as the eye can see: muted colors of greens and browns against the gray backdrop of an overcast sky and pockets of low-lying fog blanketing the ground. Immerse yourself in the sights and sounds of soggy, decomposing vegetation, waterlogged stumps, and overgrown trees.

Dark naturalism features swampy animal life, like eels, frogs, chirping insects, birds, slugs, and worms, and the smells of damp earth, rot, muck, and mire. The books curated for this reading list are connected in a variety of ways. Reading back-to-back provides an intoxicating plunge into a saturating atmosphere that's eerie and spooky but strangely cozy and satisfying at the same time.

Book Vibrations: *animals, childhood friends, dark secrets, disappearances, eco-horror, English salt marshes (the fen, swamps, bogs), family relationships, fungus, grief, isolation, loss, monsters & demons, murder, mystery, paranormal & supernatural activities, urban legends, visions, witchcraft & magic*

Green Fuse Burning

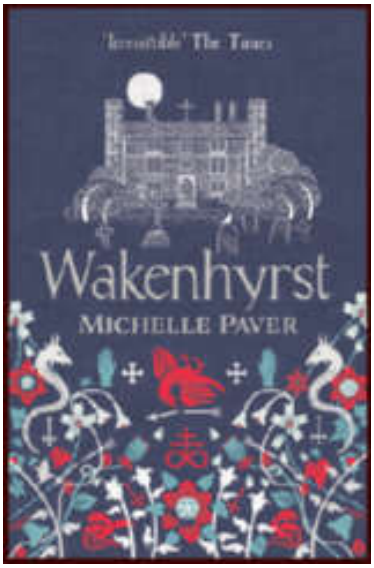
Tiffany Morris
STELLIFORM PRESS | 2023 | 112 PAGES

A woman named Rita receives a gift of an art grant from her partner to go to a retreat at an isolated cabin in the woods on the edge of a swamp. Alone, Rita is confronted with repressed emotional energy surrounding the death of her estranged Mi'kmaq father manifesting itself in supernatural ways.

My Thoughts: Reading this story felt like a mixed-media collage for the mind with images of crow feathers, mycelium, moss, and croaking frogs interwoven with the emotional stages of grief. Each chapter opened with a description of Rita's artwork. Drawing inspiration from her unsettled soul and the disquieting atmosphere of the swamp, Rita embarks on a hauntingly beautiful and healing journey of self-discovery and acceptance.

This book feels fresh and original. The author found a unique way to communicate deeply personal expressions of emotion through the artwork of a fictional character. The experience is magical and transformative.

WAKENHYRST

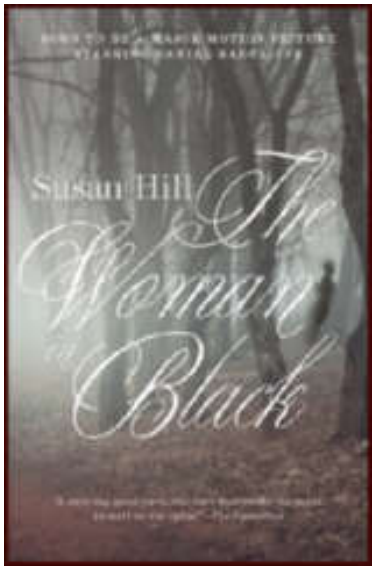


Michelle Paver (2019)
HEAD OF ZEUS | 2024 | 416 PAGES

This story starts with the murder of a madman in a rural swamp on private property, then takes the reader back in time to an isolated estate called Wake's End in the middle of the fen (wetlands). A young girl named Maud grows up under the strict rules of her father's patriarchal, religious worldview. As she matures, she starts reading his journal to understand him better, learning things that change the direction of her life and the boundaries of their relationship.

My Thoughts: I wanted to live in the pages of this book. It's like a Gothic *Downton Abbey*—a journey of self-awareness and independence, wrapped in a murder mystery, with elements of romance, witchcraft, and demonology. This is one of my top ten favorite Gothic books and it would fit nicely in so many other lists, but one of the most unique aspects of this story is the setting on a fen (wetlands). A chilling, atmospheric masterpiece, this story feels like it was dredged up from the dark, murky depths of a cursed fen. Paver is a master of mood and atmosphere. She writes the kind of horror that seeps into your bones. Her storytelling is alluring and inescapable. The fen itself is a character, suffocating you with its damp, sinister presence. The Gothic elements are perfection: a decaying mansion, a repressed heroine, and the ever-present question of whether the horrors are supernatural or born of human madness. And the folklore! Paver pulls from real medieval superstition, adding a layer of authenticity that makes the story feel both ancient and timeless. You cannot top horror when it combines both Gothic and folk elements. Paver's storytelling abilities shine as she draws readers close with a warm, cozy aesthetic inside Wake's End then captivates with a strong, capable young woman protagonist as she develops into a force to be reckoned with. She's a fiercely intelligent, defiant heroine in a world designed to crush her. It's brilliant. Once you immerse yourself in the cursed fen, you'll never want to leave.

THE WOMAN IN BLACK



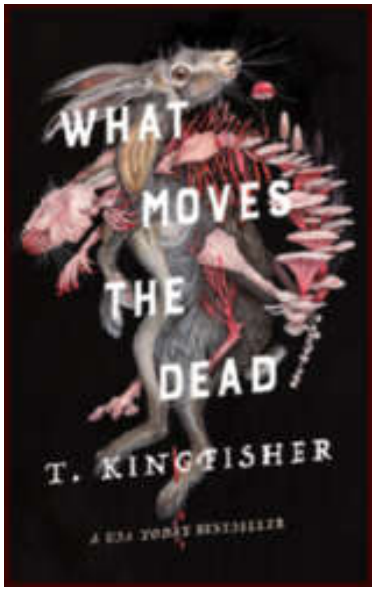
Susan Hill
VINTAGE | 1983 | 176 PAGES

Arthur Kipps is a young, ambitious solicitor who is sent to attend a funeral and settle accounts for a client in a rural town. He must make a visit to Eel Marsh House, a dilapidated manor hidden in the middle of the foggy salt marshes. He finds himself stranded out there during the high tide and experiences a plethora of paranormal activity to which he responds with reasonable objections, reluctant to believe there's anything paranormal happening. But the buried secrets and sinister history of Eel Marsh are persistent and make a believer out of him.

My Thoughts: How was this written in the '80s? It feels like a classic Victorian era ghost story. Susan Hill obviously set out to capture that aesthetic and hit her mark. The setting and Eel Marsh House are truly the main characters. They work in tandem to give the reader a sense of extreme isolation. The access road routinely disappears under brackish marsh waters while a thick layer of fog rolls in, completely enveloping the estate and blocking it from view,

inside or out. Poor Arthur Kipps is helpless against the power of the marsh, paranormal activity, and the overwhelming weight of buried secrets desperate to get out. One of my favorite tropes is the reluctant believer who dismisses all the paranormal phenomena with some kind of flimsy "reasonable" explanation. Eventually, ghosts always win. This is no exception, and it's just a delight to experience it.

What Moves the Dead



T. Kingfisher
TOR NIGHTFIRE | 2022 | 176 PAGES

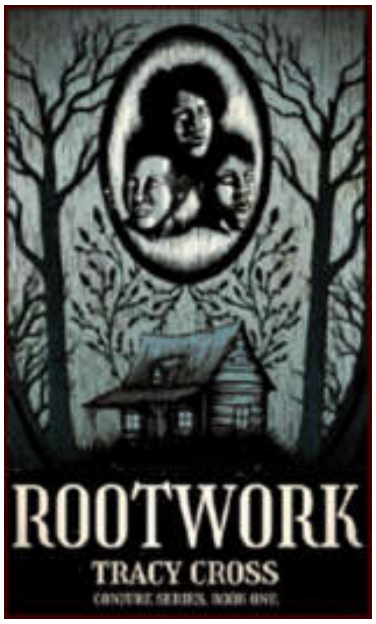
This is a reimagining of the classic Edgar Allan Poe story, "The Fall of the House of Usher." The narrator, Alex Easton, is a nonbinary, retired lieutenant in the Gallaecian army who has been summoned to a small rural town to help their dying childhood friend, Madeline Usher. Upon arrival, Alex meets a fellow houseguest, James Denton (a doctor), as well as an eccentric mycologist named Eugenia Potter. Together with

Madeline's brother Roderick, they must all solve the complicated mysteries surrounding the Ushers and their large estate.

My Thoughts: I have come to expect the perfect blend of horror and humor from T. Kingfisher. Alex is a protagonist you can root for—pragmatic, sharp-witted, and relatable in the face of the otherworldly horrors they uncover. The secondary characters, including an eccentric mycologist obsessed with fungi, add layers of charm and levity that make the darker moments hit even harder. The writing is filled with lush descriptions that make every detail of the decaying Usher house come alive. There are things—awful, pulsating things—moving just beneath the surface. Kingfisher doesn't shy away from the grotesque, creating an atmosphere so unsettling it feels like spores might start growing in your lungs while you read.

What Moves the Dead is technically book one in a series of books, but they can both stand alone and do not need to be read in any order; they just have recurring characters and similar storytelling vibes. I also want to mention that it is not necessary to have read Poe before reading this book.

ROOTWORK

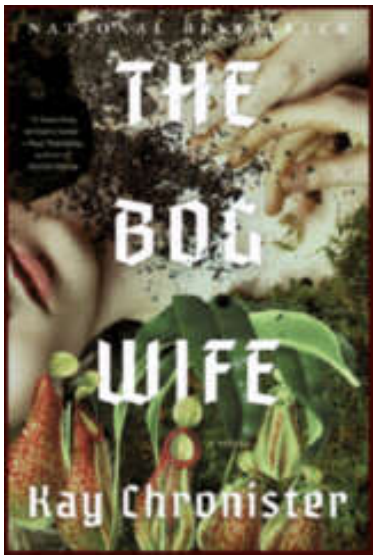


Tracy Cross
DARK MATTER INK | 2022 | 182 PAGES

Rootwork *is a coming-of-age tale set in the late 1800s in the swamps of Louisiana. Three sisters, Betty, Anne, and Pee Wee, spend the summer with their Aunt Theodora—a hoodoo priestess. When tragedy strikes, the sisters exhibit the true nature of their heritage and spirit of independence.*

My Thoughts: *Rootwork* is a truly fascinating and absorbing tale strengthened by its deeply rooted identity in cultural folklore and history. I fell in love with the young sisters Betty, Anne, and Pee Wee. They come alive on the page with colorful descriptions of their hair and clothes, as well as the way they talk to the grown-ups around them and each other. It's the first book in a line of novellas I curated for Dark Matter INK called Dark HART. The author's family and their shared experiences and history are the inspiration behind *Rootwork*. The love the author has for her heritage shines through the storytelling.

The Bog Wife



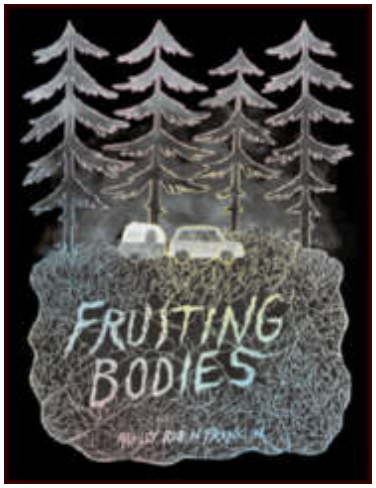
Kay Chronister
COUNTERPOINT LLC | 2024 | 336 PAGES

The story of the Haddesley family is set in West Virginia on a cranberry bog that has been in the family for generations. The patriarch performs a ritual that results in the vegetation of the bog knitting together a human woman called a "bog wife" that the patriarch marries and creates a family to tend to the land and carry on the family tradition. Our story picks up in a crisis for the modern-day Haddesley family. The patriarch is dying, the bog wife has also died, and the children must sort out how the family legacy will be carried out.

My Thoughts: This is the story of a patriarchy dying and the next generation is forced to make complicated decisions that will have an impact on the rest of their lives. Following realistic patterns of human behavior and psychology, we watch some children struggle with breaking from tradition while others slowly come to the realization that they are now the masters of their own destiny. This story features one of my favorite horror cocktails: the seductive blend of folk and Gothic swirling together in the brackish waters of

an isolated ancestral swamp. It would be so atmospheric to read this back-to-back with other books on this list, especially *Wakenhyrst.*

Fruiting Bodies



Ashley Robin Franklin (she/they)
SILVER SPROCKET | 2022 | 48 PAGES (GRAPHIC NOVEL)

Fran needs to get to her partner in the Pacific Northwest, so she tags along with her brother and his friend on their camping trip. They take a wrong turn and run out of gas in the middle of a dark, deeply wooded area. Preparing to settle in for the night and deal with their situation in the morning, a stranger shows up out of nowhere.

My Thoughts: The artwork is atmospheric with specific attention to native Pacific Northwest flora and fauna. Almost as a direct contrast to the unsettling vibes of the story, the author/illustrator creates a whimsical, cozy setting that is soothing for the eyes. They do an exceptional job of distracting the reader with lively banter between the characters so that the horror beats land their punches perfectly. The body horror visuals are a real treat for readers who are used to translating those graphic images into their minds from just words on

the page. I especially loved the relational dynamics, adult sexual tensions, and queer representation.

The Spore Queen

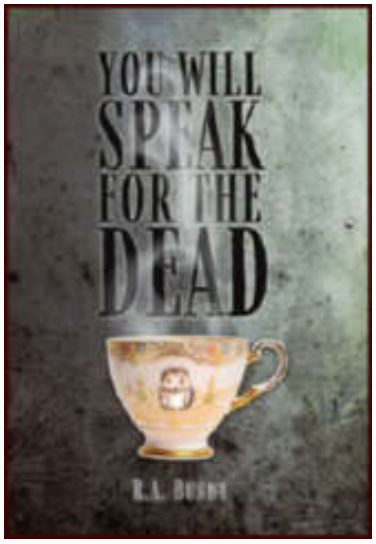
Debra Castaneda
SHADOW CANYON PRESS | 2024 | 252 PAGES

A woman goes on an expedition to the Redwood Forest near Mendocino, California, and the Limekiln State Park. She is a journalist investigating the natural devastation left behind in the wake of a big storm. She never returns. Unhappy with the local law enforcement's investigation, her parents take the search into their own hands.

My Thoughts: I would categorize this book with other thriller/horror hybrids. Part of this story has a very traditional "missing person/police procedural" vibe that I always show up for. The other part of it explores Mexican folklore, brujería, and gods and goddesses infusing those elements with the magical healing properties of mycelium. Debra Casteneda is a Kindle Unlimited

horror queen with a whole series of good books for readers to enjoy. You can easily get lost in her back catalog for a while and by the time you're finished, she will likely have something new out to read.

You Will Speak for the Dead



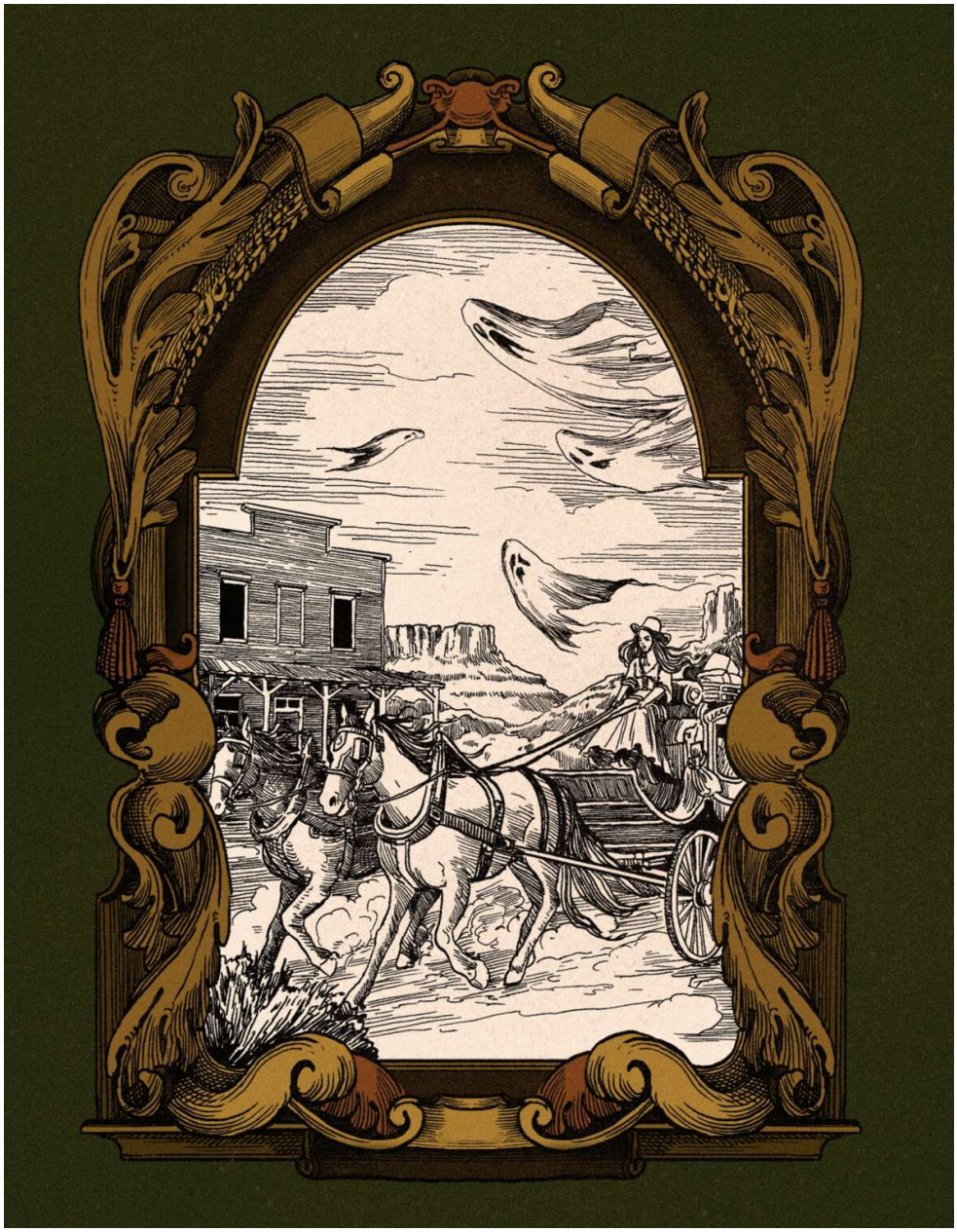
R. A. Busby
STELLIFORM PRESS | 2024 | 90 PAGES

Paul has it rough. He's grieving the loss of his mother and going through a bad breakup at the same time. He finds solace in distracting himself with work; the latest is a new client for his professional clean-up company specializing in hoarding. The house belonged to a reclusive biologist and it's not just your run-of-the-mill hoard—it's alive.

My Thoughts: R. A. Busby is my favorite body horror author. There is something so mind-altering about the descriptions of bodily trauma and the way her detailed images get lodged in your brain for hours after reading. One specific scene was so visceral, I had to do a few quick Google searches so I could see the specific "thing" in question, and I was horrified! I gagged. I squeezed my eyes shut. I

never want to hear certain words or phrases ever again … you'll know when you get there. But the best thing about this book is not the way it grosses you out (though that is fun), it's the humanity and emotional vibrations permeating through the horror. The best kind of dark, disturbing storytelling is when it gets under your skin and into your heart. And this book does it.

Not Your Dad's Westerns



Clear your mind of everything you conjure up when you hear the word "Western" as a genre. Stop! I saw those images of cowboys on horses riding off into the sunset, shoot-outs in the streets of some ghost town, pretty women dancing on a stage in a saloon, bar fights, gunshots, and carriages … I said clear your minds. Now, let's start

fresh with zero expectations or stereotypes. The following reading list has been curated for you to fall in love (or back in love) with the genre by reading books that take a much different approach and perspective.

> **Book Vibrations:** *adventure, epic saga, fantasy or dystopian world-building with Wild West vibes, magical realism, quest, strong women protagonists, supernatural, very bad baddies, vivid setting*

Vermilion: The Adventures of Lou Merriwether, Psychopomp

Molly Tanzer
WORD HORDE | 2015 | 384 PAGES

A clever, gender-defying heroine named Lou Merriwether is an exorcist by trade with the ability and swagger necessary to banish disruptive spirits. She lives in a supernatural version of the Wild West, populated by ghosts, monsters, and the occasional jiangshi—a Chinese reanimated corpse! Vermilion *takes the classic tropes of a traditional Western and enhances them with a steampunk flair. Infused with dark humor and*

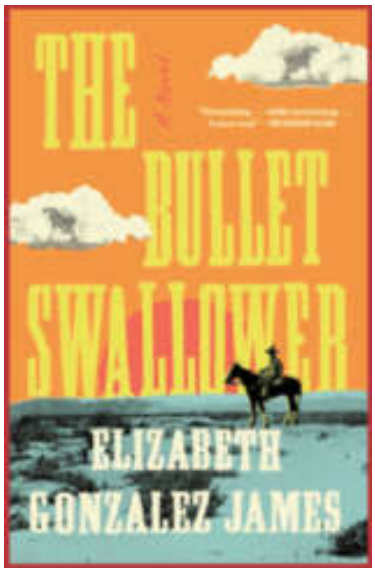
social commentary, Tanzer's book expertly balances multiple storylines with finesse.

My Thoughts: Westerns have a lot of work to do in the minds of avid readers who are familiar with all the overused tropes and stereotypical characters. Talk about the genre, and you're almost certain to see eye rolls or groans, which is fair, because the patriarchal Westerns of yesterday are very dated.

Oftentimes women characters were left at the ranch while the men went on their adventure, or they are the saloon girls, forever used for entertainment or serving the drinks.

Due to ingenious modern horror and dark fiction writers, Westerns are getting a new lease on life as characters, settings, and storylines have new breath in their lungs. Molly Tanzer flips the script. The main character is a person of color, and their sidekick is white. Instead of heading "out West," they head East. Lou's journey to solve the mystery of disappearing Chinese workers is part detective noir and part supernatural adventure. I absolutely loved the Victorian-era San Fransisco setting with a dark fantasy flourish. Perhaps my favorite element is the practice of psychopompery—a service dedicated to guiding spirits back to the afterlife. The only Western aspect of this Western is in the aesthetics.

THE BULLET SWALLOWER



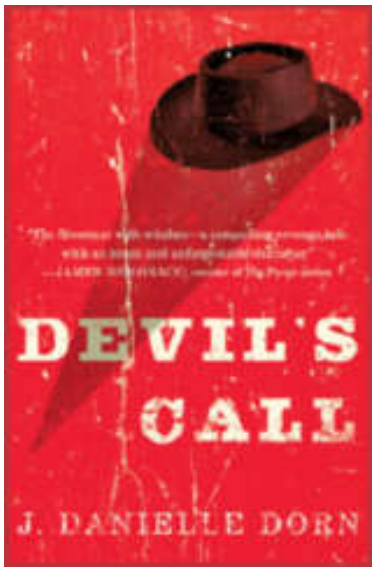
Elizabeth Gonzalez James
SIMON & SCHUSTER | 2024 | 272 PAGES

An epic family saga, this story follows the Sonoros and their generational trauma of being haunted by a shadowy figure named Remedio. Two timelines detail the accounts of Antonio, a Mexican Bandido who leaves his family and homeland to rob a train, and how he came to be known as El Tragabales (The Bullet Swallower) in 1895 and his great grandson, Juan Antonio, who is a wealthy, singing movie star in 1965.

"No one is too wicked for grace."

My Thoughts: The author crushes outdated Western stereotypes and tropes by blending in magical realism, Gothic undertones, cultural vibrancy, and beautiful literary storytelling. It will be a crime against humanity and a disservice to us all if this doesn't get a cinematic adaptation. Until then, the movie that played in my mind while I read was plenty satisfying.

DEVIL'S CALL



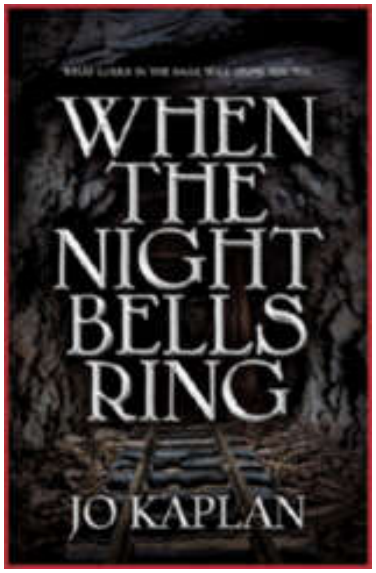
J. Danielle Dorn (they/them)

INKSHARES | 2017 | 275 PAGES

The synopsis can be summed up succinctly with the first line of the book, "Before I leave you in this world, my dear, I aim to record what came to pass when your momma rode from Nebraska Territory to Louisiana to the frozen Badlands to bring to justice the monster who murdered your father." This line came from a letter written to the unborn child of Li Lian, a woman gifted in the ways of witchcraft passed on from generation to generation of MacPherson women.

My Thoughts: A witchy Western. I mean, if that doesn't already entice you, let me also sprinkle in words like "strong women characters," "magic," and "vengeance." Keeping in step with the historical fiction vibes and Western flavors, the magical system is refreshingly simple and earthy. And you can't very well have an adventure horror without some vibrant sidekicks; this is where Roger Hawking comes in to offer witty banter with Li Lian and clever showmanship. Short chapters, high-stakes action sequences, and an urgent pace will keep you turning the pages in what will likely be a one-sitting read. It was for me.

When the Night Bells Ring

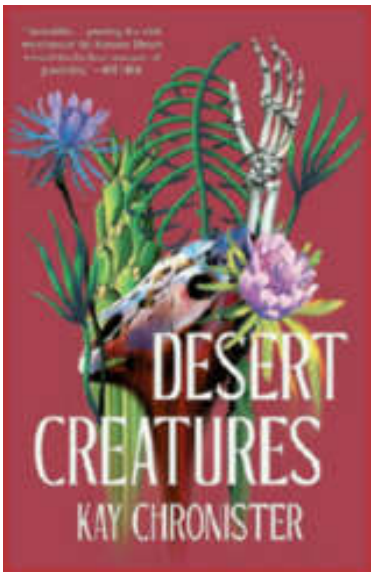


Jo Kaplan
CAMCAT BOOKS | 2022 | 304 PAGES

Mads and Waynoka are "Dust Devils," climate refugees fleeing from drought and unbearable temperatures. They come across an abandoned coal mine and decide to seek reprieve in the cool, dark underground and maybe even find water. But when the ladder breaks, they are left stranded and not alone.

My Thoughts: The world-building in this story is fascinating. I was completely absorbed by the rich, detailed storytelling and immediately invested in the survival of the two leads. The Western-style prose and atmosphere coupled with the eco-horror, apocalyptic landscape gave me *Mad Max* vibes. There were some sections that felt overly drawn out, but I would recommend this book to anyone who doesn't gravitate toward that subgenre as the perfect example of how fresh and exciting it can be in capable hands.

Desert Creatures



Kay Chronister
EREWHON | 2022 | 288 PAGES

Desert Creatures *is a speculative, postapocalyptic eco-horror with Weird Western vibes. Magdala is a resourceful young girl seeking a cure for her disability in a hostile world on the edge of destruction. She is determined to reach Las Vegas where she can request the healing service of magical people called Saints but must first survive the desolate and dangerous wasteland of the American Southwest. Hunting her are cactus-animal creatures and a bizarre religious group known for their grotesque rituals.*

My Thoughts: After reading and falling head over heels in love with *The Bog Wife*, I had to go back and read Chronister's debut novel. It did not disappoint! There is so much to say about my experience, but I also want to protect some of the more unusual plot developments because they are so fun to discover as you read. I must highlight the impeccable world-building. The landscape and atmosphere create a mood that lingers long after reading. I can *feel* it now, even as I type. An overarching theme of despair and hopelessness permeates throughout the narrative—which makes Magdala's relentless advocacy for her own well-being so endearing

and emotional. The religious aspect is my favorite part of this story, the way that clinging to faith is sometimes the only thing people in desperate times can do to keep themselves going.

Exposing Historical Erasure

One of the most powerful experiences in reading is diving into historical events through the voices of those who lived them most deeply. It's a chance for marginalized communities to reach back through time, seize the narrative, and declare boldly, "*This is our story; let us tell it.*" Historical fiction transforms blank pages into vibrant canvases, where emotions, cultures, and the rich tapestry of human lives are fully expressed. It draws us into the humanity of those who endured, transcending stereotypes and unraveling the distortions of history crafted by those who benefited from suppressing the truth. These stories are a gift—a way to honor the past and reclaim the dignity of our shared ancestry. For women especially, the right to speak, vote, and control our own destinies is a hard-won privilege that is constantly under threat. Writing and sharing our stories isn't just a creative act; it's a rebellion, a reclamation, and a promise to ourselves:

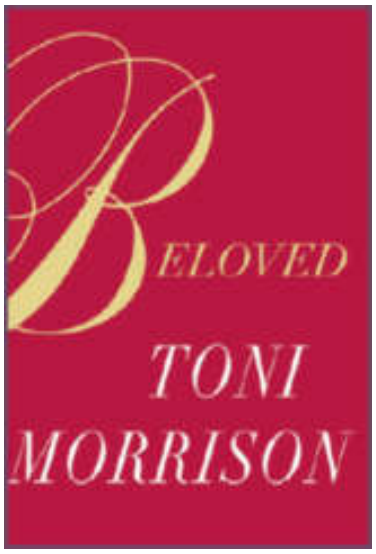
We will not be silenced.

Reading these stories is an act of solidarity,

We hear you.

> **Book Vibrations:** *abuse, burdens, community, enslavement, friendship, generational trauma, hardships, haunted past, hope, pain, psychic trauma, redemption, resiliency, secrets, survival, vengeance*

Beloved



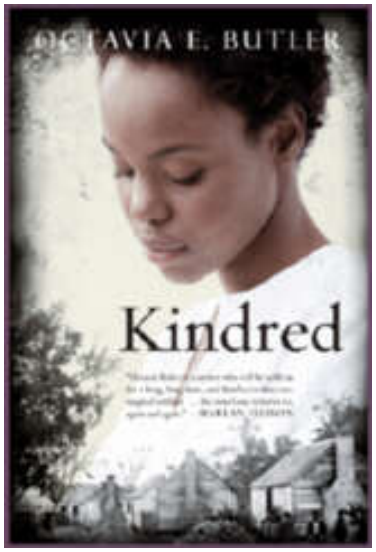
Toni Morrison
KNOPF | 1987 | 324 PAGES

Toni Morrison has shared that Beloved *is based on the story of a young mother named Margaret Garner who was enslaved in the state of Kentucky but fled to a free state. When U. S. Marshalls tried to capture her, she locked herself away in a cabin, killed one child and was in the process of taking the lives of her other children, determined to spare them from a life of enslavement. The fictional story* Beloved *is the story of the maternal bond between a mother, Sethe, who would do anything for her children and Beloved, a daughter who comes back to haunt her mother for taking her life.*

My Thoughts: The moral dilemma of Sethe's act to spare her children a life of slavery by taking their lives has haunted me from the time I finished this book in high school to now, and it will always haunt me. People who say it isn't a horror book can't define what horror means to me, and this book is the definition of devastation and horror. A mother with children during the time of slavery is in a position of responsibility and forced to make an impossible choice. What's worse? Ending their lives or allowing them to be taken from her to live a life that's unlivable? A life sentence of pain and suffering. This. Is. Horror.

There is nothing like it and there will be nothing like it ever again. The generational trauma and psychological damage of enslavement is personified in all the characters of this book, primarily Sethe and Beloved. And Paul D too. If I had to point to one book that I've read that had a significant impact on the way I see the world, I would choose this one.

KINDRED



Octavia Butler
BEACON PRESS | 1979 | 288 PAGES

Dana is a modern Black woman who is suddenly pulled from her life into the antebellum South and must survive slavery.

My Thoughts: This book is a masterpiece. I'm so pleased I read it later in my reading journey so that I was equipped, mentally, to truly appreciate the craft. At first, Dana has no idea how or why she has been transported back in time. Everything is so chaotic as she desperately tries to make sense of her situation. Eventually, she realizes she is connected to Rufus, a young boy she encounters who

will grow up to be part of her ancestry. Readers are bound to Dana as she navigates this unprecedented journey. Her feelings range from fear and a refusal to accept what is happening to assuming responsibility and meeting her fate head-on. Dana's resiliency and unique perspective as a modern woman living in the past is such an arresting concept. I don't really think of it as science fiction just because it has time traveling; I feel like it's a historical horror shelved right alongside *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. Both books taught me so much more than my history classes ever did.

When the Reckoning Comes

LaTanya McQueen
HARPER PERENNIAL | 2021 | 256 PAGES

Mira is invited to a childhood friend's wedding in her fictional hometown of Kipsen, North Carolina. She is in shock when she discovers the wedding will take place at the Woodsman Plantation, a place where enslaved Black people were separated from their families, tortured, and even killed. To add to Mira's shock, part of the ceremony includes Black employees dressing in period clothing and serving the guests in

attendance. Although she is outraged about this situation, Mira stays so she can reconnect with two of her closest childhood friends, but there is so much more going on at this plantation than meets the eye—something that could threaten the lives of everyone at the wedding.

My Thoughts: While she is at the Woodsman Plantation, Mira is haunted by horrible graphic visions of brutality, rape, torture, and murder. The blood that has been spilled and the injustices that have been carried out are crying out, demanding restitution. The story builds to a climax and the pages fly: Will history repeat itself when Celine, the bride-to-be, doesn't show up to her own wedding? Will injustices committed at Woodsman be avenged?

While the subject matter here is extremely disturbing and graphically detailed, LaTanya McQueen successfully employs effective literary techniques, like the voices of the enslaved, multiple timelines, and sensory visions from the past, to break out from the one narrator point of view to enrich the storytelling. These transitions keep the reader engaged like a thriller providing a layered, textured experience to the horrors being depicted. The perfect blend of horror and thriller. I love the creative way the author developed this story into a supernatural horror story that would envelop the reader so they could be fully immersed in the history through Mira's explicit visions.

Five Little Indians

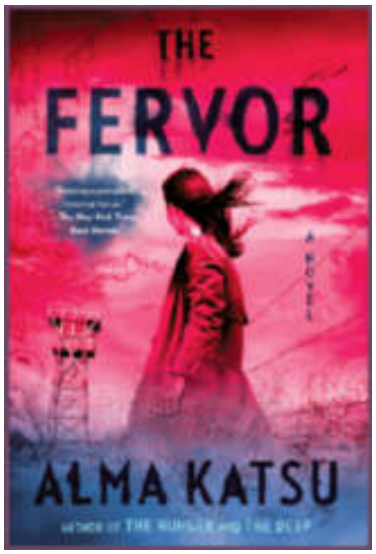
Michelle Good
HARPER PERENNIAL | 2020 | 304 PAGES

Meet five survivors of a rural Canadian Residential School, an institution set up by religious colonizers to remove Indigenous children from their families and communities to subvert their culture and traditions in favor of a forced integration into the new dominant culture taking over the land. They struggle to endure the overwhelming process of managing psychological and physical trauma from the kidnapping, isolation, and various forms of abuses systematically forced upon their young bodies and minds while trying to function in modern society.

My Thoughts: Michelle Good is a Cree author and lawyer. She told the stories of Residential School survivors as part of her advocacy in the courtroom. There is a character in the book with a similar mission. It's abundantly clear that this book is a way to tell the truth about what happened to children in those Residential Schools, but also to show how the abuse and trauma has long-term effects into their adulthood. The book is split into five perspectives as we follow each character on their unique journey from captivity to freedom. It's a harrowing, gut-wrenching experience. I listened to the audiobook over a few weeks and by the end of it, I realized that this book intimately changed my life. Even though the characters aren't

real, the stories of what happened to them reflect an ugly truth about humanity—what people in power are capable of: kidnapping children, forcing them to live in a prison to do slave labor, making them suffer all kinds of cruelties and acts of violent abuse. It's disgusting and abhorrent. Books like this are important for everyone to read so that what is done in secret can be known. I enjoyed the way Good told these stories through the lens of "what happens after" … the victories and the hardships of surviving.

The Fervor



Alma Katsu
G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS | 2022 | 320 PAGES

Set during World War II, this historical, supernatural thriller specifically centers on the installation of Japanese internment camps. Meiko Briggs and her daughter Aiko are taken from their home in Seattle and forced to live in one of the internment camps in Idaho. While they struggle to survive their new reality, a strange illness is spreading throughout the prisoners. Meiko recognizes it as a supernatural threat from the Joro

spider demon folklore stories told to her as a child. Meiko faces the cruelties of racial injustice and the spread of this supernatural illness.

My Thoughts: Alma Katsu is a historical fiction, horror author who was trained as an intelligence analyst. Her stories reflect an attention to detail and a desire to educate the reader that sets her work apart from others. I never learned about the Japanese internment camps of World War II in school. It wasn't until I started reading more historical fiction that I realized what they teach kids in school is the historical fiction and many fiction authors are out there telling the truth. It's a beautiful thing, this relationship between a reader and their books. I love reading historical fiction on my e-reader because I can highlight a date or event and read about it online. Alma Katsu pours an incredible amount of research and knowledge into her historical horror books. This one just happens to be my favorite, but I also loved *The Hunger* (about the Donner Party) and *The Deep* (about the RMS *Titanic*).

History and Horror

By Alma Katsu

Horror, it turns out, is a great complement to history.

With the horror genre diversifying over the past couple years, historical horror has established itself as a lesser-known but growing subgenre. History is packed with a lot of terrible events, both things beyond man's control (like natural disasters) and horrors we inflict on each other. When it comes to the latter, however, we tend not to want to examine our part. We don't want to confront our past misdeeds. The motto for historical horror might as well be, "Let's face it: Humans can be monsters."

While many horror fans know about *The Terror* by Dan Simmons, a reimagining of the fateful voyages of the HMS *Erebus* and HMS *Terror* popularized by the fantastic AMC TV series, newer books such as *The Reformatory* by Tananarive Due, a frightening story set in the Jim Crow South of a boy unjustly sent to a haunted reformatory, are renewing interest in the subgenre. *The Reformatory* is a great example of why historical horror works. The terrors in this novel are due less to the supernatural parts than to the sad fact that a place like this *actually existed* once upon a time.

Historical horror enables us to face our past crimes and inconvenient truths. It's like the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down. People are a little more willing to lose themselves in the story when the bad thing can be blamed on something make-believe. You may think that not a lot of people would be interested in a story about people resorting to cannibalism to survive, but *The Hunger* ended up being quite widely read, with rights sold in 17 languages (countries where the story of the Donner Party was barely known), partly because supernatural elements

made it easier to address the issues that caused the disaster to happen in real life.

The reason these tales continue to be necessary is because we fail to learn from the lessons of the past, and you know the old saying about those who fail to learn from history. Sadly, we repeat history left and right. The real lesson of the Donner Party was that a group of vulnerable people believed a charlatan who was only concerned about his political aspirations, and a lot of people died under terrible circumstances because of it. The *Titanic,* inspiration for *The Deep*, was a floating reflection of drastic class inequality and lack of political representation of women at the time. *The Wehrwolf*, set in Germany as the Allied troops crossed its borders, is about the dangers of militias and indulging magical thinking.

The other reason readers find historical horror so fascinating is because it pulls back the curtain on events we think we know, but really don't. One thing I've come to realize is that what we learn in school about a historical event is often only a sound bite, abbreviated and packaged so that it can be shoehorned in a busy semester. One of the most rewarding things about writing historical horror is hearing from readers who were so captivated that they had to learn everything they could about the incident. It's an honor and a pleasure to know I've inspired someone to deepen his or her knowledge. When we wade deeper, we learn about peripheral characters who turn out to be complex and important in their own right. We learn, sometimes, that the past was whitewashed, that the innocent were wrongly tarred, and the guilty have gone free. Ironically, we can learn through fiction that what we had been taught as "fact" may not always be the truth.

Alma Katsu is the award-winning author of eight novels, including three historical horror novels (The *Hunger, The Deep,* and *The Fervor*). Her historical horror story *The Wehrwolf* won the Bram Stoker Awards for long fiction. Her

next novel, *Fiend,* will be her first full-length work of contemporary horror.

Psychic Trauma

I chose these books to reflect psychic trauma used as an expressed vulnerability by the main character or characters. Sometimes the psychic trauma manifests itself as mental illness, vivid recurring visions/nightmares or sleep paralysis, deteriorating physical changes, or severe emotional distress. Usually, the trauma is due to

grief, physical abuse, disasters or accidents, and sometimes even physical illness. There is an inability to deal with a current crisis which leads the characters into madness, or at least people thinking that they're delusional. So convenient in a horror book setting where supernatural or paranormal events could be dismissed out of hand because nobody believes a character experiencing psychic trauma. Through these narratives, we see the mind's incredible resilience, but also its terrifying fragility. Each book not only entertains but also provokes thought about the human condition and our responses to trauma. Together, they form a chilling tapestry of psychic distress and survival.

Book Vibrations: *asylums, death & dying, domestic drama, dreams, family dynamics, grief, mental health, missing people, murder, patriarchy, secret societies, visions*

She is a Haunting

Trang Thanh Tran (she/they)

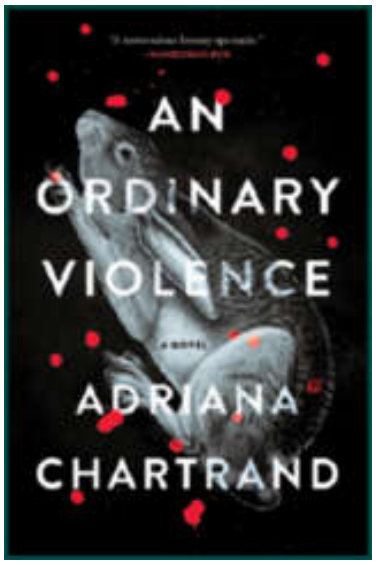
BLOOMSBURY YA | 2023 | 352 PAGES

Jade Nguyen strikes a deal with her father to help him restore an old French Colonial house in Vietnam he purchased as an investment in their future. Jade and her father have trouble relating to each other due to personal resentments. She believes he has spent too much time away from the family, and he can't come to terms with her romantic interests in women. Tensions in Flower House mount as soon as Jade arrives. At night, Jade experiences sleep paralysis while different paranormal manifestations visit her. It's clear someone is trying to tell her something.

My Thoughts: A fascinating blend of haunted house tropes, intense family dynamics, and culture folklore makes a horror cocktail that feels fresh and invigorating to the genre. I enjoyed the complexity of the main protagonist, Jade—who reminded me of another favorite fierce teenage protagonist named Jade from the Indian Lake Trilogy by Stephen Graham Jones. Both characters struggle with their cultural identity and a deep longing to belong. They both have problematic relationships with their fathers who have unrealistic expectations of their daughters that result in harsh demands placed on them. These difficulties and failures to live up to the standards their fathers set for them lead to morally gray behaviors and personality flaws. Jade Nguyen can be needlessly combative and hard to reason with, but it's easy to empathize with a young girl struggling with so many things that feel larger-than-life: closeted queerness and repressed emotions coupled with sleep paralysis and nightmares as soon as she moves into the new house. That's a lot to sink your teeth into.

If you loved the slasher horror *My Heart is a Chainsaw, She is a Haunting* is a complementary paranormal haunted house story with similar vibes and characters.

AN ORDINARY VIOLENCE

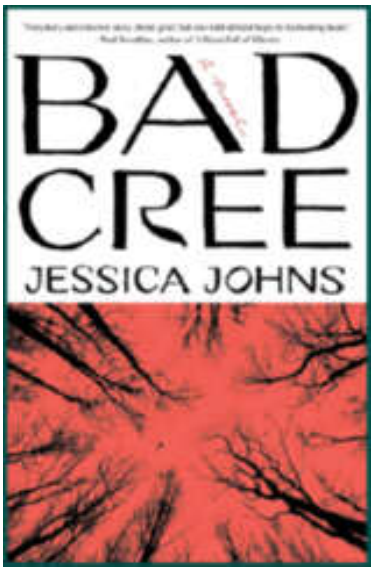


Adriana Chartrand
SPIDERLINE | 2023 | 256 PAGES

Dawn, an Indigenous woman from Toronto, is forced to return to her childhood home. With her whole life upended, things are understandably stressful and strained. But it doesn't explain the messages she's getting from beyond the grave or why she feels so unsettled. She has been estranged from her brother, Cody, ever since he was incarcerated several years ago. Upon her return, Cody is suddenly released with a stranger alongside him. Dawn suspects her brother, and this new friend, are part of something connected to her uneasy feelings.

My Thoughts: One of my favorite tropes is the main character reluctantly returning home. Once they get there, they are forced to wrestle with past trauma and broken relationships. The main character, Dawn, takes note of the overwhelming number of missing women in her area. I loved the way the family drama serves as a distraction from something far more insidious going on. Adriana Chartrand did a phenomenal job with allowing the main character to juggle multiple situations at once so that the tension of eerie unease was kept throughout the entire book.

Bad Cree



Jessica Johns
DOUBLEDAY | 2023 | 272 PAGES

Mackenzie's sister Sabrina dies unexpectedly not long after her grandmother's passing and instead of moving through the grief and the pain with her family, she ran away and avoided it all (a bad Cree). Every night, her dreams are growing more and more intense and violent. Mackenzie is scared to keep going through her psychic trauma alone. She knows her family will have answers and help her get to the bottom of what's happening to her, but this means confronting her mistakes and taking ownership. It means facing grief head-on instead of running away.

My Thoughts: This story was so real and relatable. Watching the main character go through her trauma reminded me of a lesson we all learn the hard way at some point in our lives—sometimes the best medicine, the remedy, the "fix," is going right through the pain of our problems instead of trying to get around them and avoid the hurt. This book is the perfect example of horror with heart. It just feels good for the soul: incredibly cathartic and satisfying.

Graveyard of Lost Children

Katrina Monroe
POISONED PEN PRESS | 2023 | 368 PAGES

When Olivia was a baby, her mother was convinced she was a changeling and threw her down into a well. Her mother was institutionalized, and Olivia survived. Now, Olivia and her partner are adjusting to life with their new baby, Flora. Plagued by intrusive thoughts and generational trauma, Olivia is terrified of being a mother.

My Thoughts: I love motherhood themes in horror. This book is compelling, entertaining, and scary at times … unsettling and creepy. I wouldn't read it if I was a first-time mom—the newborn/changeling stuff would freak me out. The black-haired creepy ghost lady might be clichéd for some, but I had to read this during the day or with the lights on. Needless to say, it worked on me—I didn't want to look at myself in the mirror at night if I got up to use the bathroom. Heavy themes of paranoia and losing one's grip on reality coupled with haunting visions and trauma made this reading experience an intense one.

The Madness

Dawn Kurtagich
GRAYDON HOUSE | 2024 | 336 PAGES

Mina gets an urgent email from her friend Lucy, forcing her to leave behind her successful private practice in London so she can have an emergency session in Wales with Lucy. She's troubled by a connection between Lucy's symptoms and a patient she has been seeing at home. As she looks a little deeper, she is plunged into a dark mystery and web of tangled secrets she had no idea were buried just under the surface.

My Thoughts: If you enjoy mixed-media elements in your horror stories, Dawn Kurtagich is the storyteller for you. All of her books feature an ephemeral quality with found journals, letters, patient files, clippings, and transcripts. *The Madness* draws inspiration from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and its epistolary style that horror readers love to gravitate toward. The prose is enriched with a Gothic setting and a pervasive moody, dark tone—I was immediately immersed in its atmosphere, running through a labyrinthine Welsh castle, uncovering secrets, and riding high on *Dracula*-esque vibes.

The Children on the Hill

Jennifer McMahon
GALLERY/SCOUT PRESS | 2022 | 352 PAGES

In 1978 Vermont, Vi and Eric live with their grandmother, Dr. Helen Hildreth, in her private mental health facility. One patient, an orphan named Iris, is adopted into their family. Vi invites Iris to join the siblings' Monster Club. Decades later, Lizzy Shelley, who is the host of a podcast called Monsters Among Us, *travels to Vermont to investigate a young girl's abduction. She understands there might be a connection to the monsters who live among us and her sister.*

My Thoughts: Jennifer McMahon told me at a book festival in Massachusetts that there is more of her in this book than any of the others. She grew up with her grandmother who was a psychiatrist, and her patients were often guests in their home. Her and her brother used to play "monster-hunter" games, and she's always wanted to infuse her childhood experiences into a novel. As a longtime Jennifer McMahon fan, I feel qualified to say that this is one of her best books. Maybe because the story is so inspired by McMahon's own early life, it carries with it a deeply personal, intimate tone, or maybe it's just a well-written tale. Whichever the

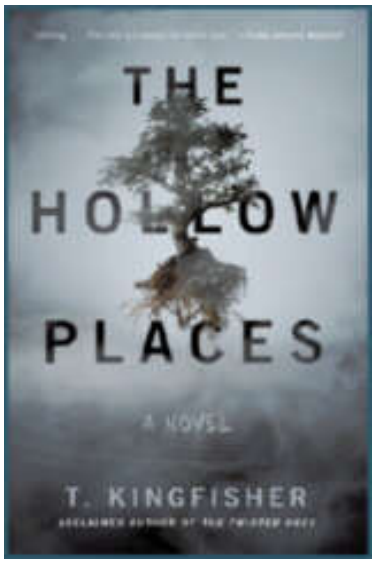
case, it’s sure to leave a lasting impression on readers who love monsters and cryptids and human monsters.

Survive Your Living Nightmares

Survival horror fiction isn't far from reality; it taps directly into primal fears and universal phobias. It's about the things we dread most: being hunted, trapped, starved, or alone in a cruel world that doesn't care about your feelings or who you are or how you got yourself in this life-or-death situation. These storytellers reach deep into their own experiences or common fears to navigate unknown environments, harsh landscapes, and hostile societies, forcing their characters to confront their limits. Everyday fears we all carry deep down. It's not just about monsters; it's about how real-world pressures ultimately reveal who we truly are. It's exciting to go on a journey that makes your heart race without ever leaving the house.

Book Vibrations: *cosmic danger, friend or foe?, harsh landscapes, mental health, paranormal & supernatural activities, pushed to the limits, the unknown, threatening entities*

The Hollow Places



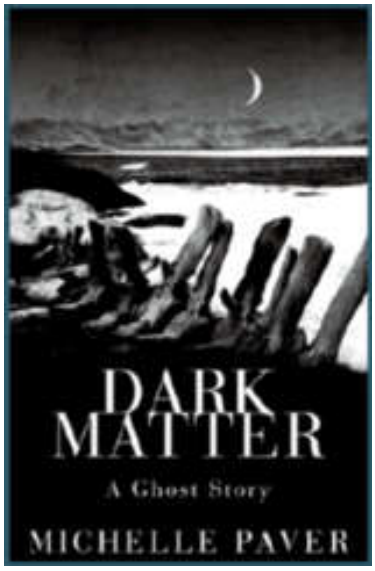
T. Kingfisher
GALLERY BOOKS | 2020 | 352 PAGES

Kara is trying to find her footing after a divorce, so her uncle offers her a room in his quirky roadside taxidermy museum in exchange for some help running the place. In getting to know the old building better, she stumbles upon a hole in the wall leading to a mysterious, unexplainable area. What starts as a fun exploration with a friend, quickly turns into a fight for their lives as they find themselves lost in some kind of portal universe inspired by Algernon Blackwood's short story, "The Willows."

My Thoughts: I read "The Willows" just before diving into this adventure and I highly recommend it. Kingfisher's callbacks to Blackwood's portal universe were so scary because I already kind of knew what was happening and what to expect. Kara and her friend Simon try to make light of their situation. They have crawled through Kara's uncle's museum and wound up in something that sounds strikingly familiar to *The Magician's Nephew* by C. S. Lewis. Remember how there were these puddles the characters could jump in and out of and land in some alternate universe? That! Except, terrifying. They're not alone. Something unseen and menacing dwells just behind the veil and it's hunting them. There's plenty of horror, humor, and heart sprinkled with gruesome depictions of

body horror and peppered with entertaining scenes of dialogue—even a subtle *Night at the Museum* (2006) movie vibe. An epic, memorable adventure story.

Dark Matter



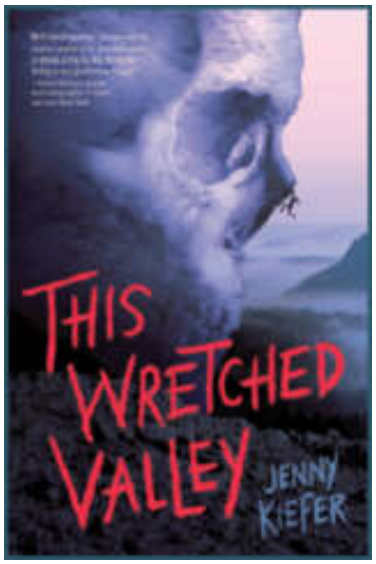
Michelle Paver
ORION BOOKS | 2010 | 256 PAGES

Five men embark on a science expedition, stopping to set up camp at a remote Arctic village called Gruhuken. They are warned by the ship captain not to stay there. But naturally, the men don't listen. One by one, the men are forced to leave and return to Norway until just one man is left to hold down the camp until they can return. He will be totally isolated as the summer ends; light is fading fast, and the sea is starting to freeze. But is he truly alone out there, or are the ship captain's warnings true? There is something wrong with Gruhuken.

My Thoughts: I read Michelle Paver's *Wakenhyrst* first, and it minted Paver as a favorite author. Then, *Dark Matter* put a wax seal right on that confirmation. This ghost story is perfection. The way she builds

up layers of tension and dread is a masterclass in using subtle changes in mood and atmosphere to create doubt in the reader's mind. As Jack's companions dwindle, it's clear to everyone but Jack that he should leave. The expedition is a bust, and yet he remains. There is nothing more terrifying than this idea of being left alone in an isolated ghost town! I love that the author wastes no time stretching this horror too thin over too many pages. It's lean and mean. I can't recommend it enough.

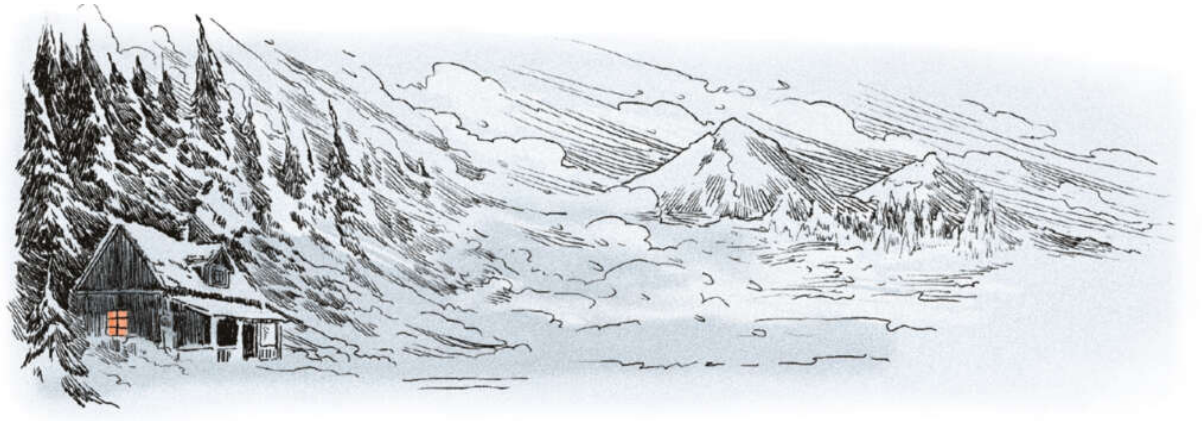
This Wretched Valley



Jenny Kiefer
QUIRK BOOKS | 2024 | 304 PAGES

A small group of people and a dog are determined to discover a new climbing destination in the Kentucky wilderness. They are warned not to explore that area, but they dismiss it as just a local legend. The book opens with a detailed rundown of all the facts and events leading up to their mysterious deaths. The rest of the book is what really happened to them—inspired by the Dyatlov Pass Incident.

My Thoughts: This survival horror debut goes from zero to sixty real fast. Not exactly extreme horror territory, but it's not far from it. The four main characters are so determined, so fixated on fortune and fame, that they ignore gut instincts, red flags, and literal warnings. And since you already know their fates on page one, you can't even hope for their survival, which makes for a very bleak yet exhilarating reading experience. Kiefer utilizes physical, natural, paranormal, and supernatural threats to turn the goosebump factor up to ten.



BLIZZARD

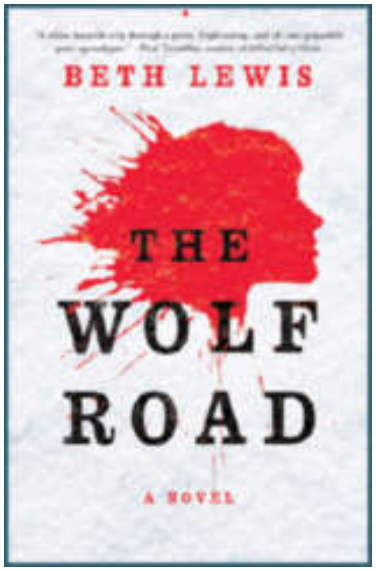
Marie Vingtras (2021) translated by Jeffery Zuckerman
HARRY N. ABRAMS | 2024 | 224 PAGES

In a remote area of Alaska, several people have established homesteads within a visible distance of each other, yet far enough away to not be considered neighbors or "neighborly," which is an important distinction. In one home with a couple and a small child, their worst fears are realized when the child runs out of the house in the middle of an extreme snowstorm. The couple ventures out to look for him while others in the area watch them; the observant strangers decide if the chaos surrounding the missing boy could be used to their benefit.

My Thoughts: I read this in one sitting. It's 200+ pages, but the story is told in multiple points of view that take up very little space on the page. Everything about this story is unsettling. The idea of an isolated area in rural Alaska where there are only a few homesteads just a few miles apart from each other—but not in the context of community—is already an uncomfortable situation. I could not turn the pages fast enough. My mind was a flurry of anxious thoughts as I wondered what I would do if this happened to me. I immediately jumped to the conclusion that I wouldn't survive, but nobody really knows what they're capable of until they're actually tested by the real thing. And that's my favorite part about reading horror: all of

the knowledge of potential outcomes and scenarios stored in my mind from reading all of these survival horror stories.

The Wolf Road



Beth Lewis
CROWN | 2016 | 368 PAGES

Sometime after an apocalyptic, catastrophic event, a seven-year-old girl gets separated from her primary caregiver during an intense storm. She is discovered by a man who lives alone in the wild. He names her Elka, and she calls him Trapper. He trains her up in his ways but suspiciously hunts wolves alone.

My Thoughts: This book is criminally underrated. I never would have found it if I hadn't been doing a deep dive on NoveList Plus for survival horror. The audiobook was available for free for a limited time, and I'm so pleased I enjoyed the book this way. The narrator did an excellent job with Elka's unique language since she didn't have a formal education. The writing style is lean and mean, reminding me of an odd combination of the movie *Sling Blade*

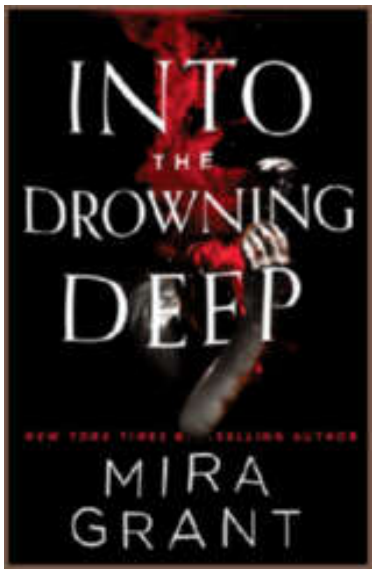
(1996) and Cormac McCarthy's book *The Road*. Elka learns about Trapper's solo adventures out in the woods and decides to run away. As he tracks her through the wilderness, she meets all sorts of animals and people.

Save Yourself from Hell

One of my favorite horror movies of all time is *Event Horizon (1997)*. It set the standard for the trope of an explorative rescue mission gone horribly wrong. A ship (could be a spaceship or a water vessel, it doesn't matter because open space and open water are relatively the same thing) sends out distress signals—in the case of *Event Horizon: Libera te tutemet ex inferi* or *Save yourself from hell*—then goes radio silent. Another crew embarks on a rescue mission, but they quickly discover something abnormal happened and there might still be a threat on board. You know you love it. The following books all play off this same trope in a variety of ways. A few things are common among all of them: Strong, capable women protagonists, spine-tingling scenes of pure terror, assaults from unknown threats, suspicious characters, and a lengthy page count, so prepare for a long haul into this survival horror reading list.

Book Vibrations: *crew dynamics, dangerous explorations, distress calls, ghosts, paranormal & supernatural activities, rescue missions, strong women protagonists, survival, unknown threats*

Into the Drowning Deep

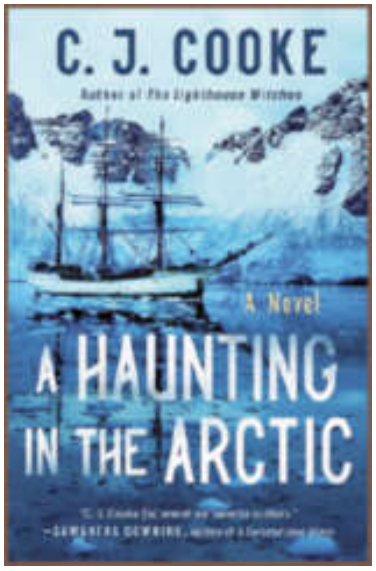


Mira Grant
ORBIT | 2017 | 448 PAGES

A movie production company sends a ship to the Mariana Trench to film a cryptid mockumentary about mermaids. The project mysteriously goes sideways and nobody from the project returns. The production company sends out another ship, this time with a team of actual experts. Victora Stewart, a marine biologist, is determined to get some answers about what happened to her sister and the rest of the original crew.

My Thoughts: I'm pretty sure this isn't going to blow anyone's mind, as I'm usually the last to know this stuff, but I only recently discovered that Mira Grant is a pseudonym for Seanan McGuire. She uses this voice for her horror titles. After I found that out, everything made sense. This is the ambitious sequel to a seventy-five-page novella titled *Rolling in the Deep*. The perfect blend of science fiction, horror, mystery, and folklore, the story immediately asks readers to forget everything we think we know about mermaids, replacing it with carnivorous predatory beings who will attack and kill. A full cast of diverse, interesting characters come together with a variety of backstories and unique motivations for contributing to this deep-sea mission. I was surprised by how quickly I read this book given its higher page count.

A Haunting in the Arctic



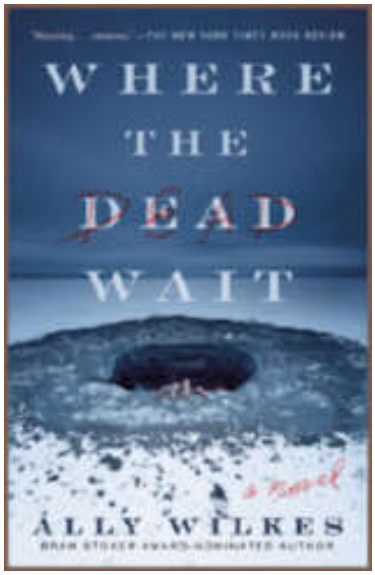
C. J. Cooke
BERKLEY | 2024 | 352 PAGES

Over a century ago, a woman was attacked and woke up on a whaling ship owned by her father called the Ormen. *The crew behaves strangely toward her—acting as though she is the key to unlocking something they have been searching for but they're tight-lipped when she seeks answers to her questions concerning her strange predicament. Present day, the* Ormen *is found washed up on the coast of Iceland and it is scheduled to be destroyed. With a sense of urgency to uncover the* Ormen*'s secrets, a woman named Dominique makes a trip out to the shipwreck to explore it before it is compromised.*

My Thoughts: Cooke's prose is as cold and unforgiving as ice itself, weaving a tale where isolation is both physical and psychological. The trauma Niki endures at the hands of her captors aboard the ship with no means of escape is a harrowing experience. Cooke does an exceptional job of painting the landscape with a descriptive brush so

readers are transported, listening to howling winds and whispers of ghosts and seeing endless darkness where a midnight sky meets the black depths of the sea. It truly sends shivers up your spine. This book blends together so many favorite elements of horror storytelling: dual timelines, Nordic folklore, curses and ghosts, creature-feature horror, and a freezing, stark, barren landscape.

Where the Dead Wait



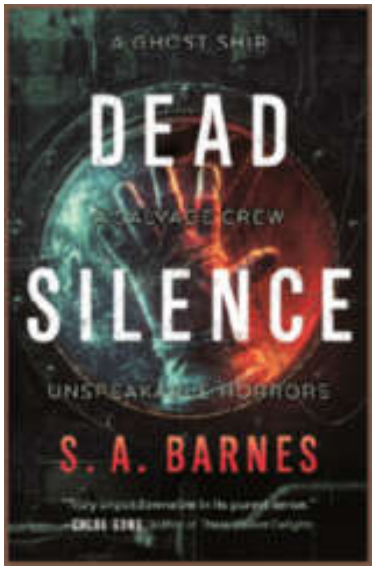
Ally Wilkes (she/they)
ATRIA BOOKS | 2023 | 400 PAGES

The psychological warfare of surviving a failed expedition weighs heavy on William Day. It has been thirteen years since he and his second-in-command, Jesse Stevens, returned to civilization, disgraced because they were forced to commit horrific atrocities to stay alive. Now, Day hears that Stevens is lost at sea again. With Stevens' wife in tow, a rescue mission sets off into a haunting and unforgiving landscape.

My Thoughts: So much more than a ghost story—I discovered an exploration of human fragility, resilience, and capacity for darkness,

as well as the complex emotions behind survivor's guilt, especially when acts of violence and violation were committed to ensure that survival. William is haunted mercilessly by his past but also by supernatural forces. The relationship between Day and Stevens is my favorite part. I hesitate to admit I have developed an affinity for romance in my horror, but when we get down to brass tacks, I feel compelled to confess it. I do love the romance! I'm here for the unrequited love, forbidden affair, secret rendezvous, and painful longings. This is a slow-burn polar-Gothic rescue mission.

Dead Silence



S. A. Barnes
TOR NIGHTFIRE | 2022 | 352 PAGES

Claire Kovalik works on a routine maintenance spaceship that is facing layoffs. The crew gets a distress signal from a nearby luxury space-liner and decides to check it out. Claire and the crew fantasize about their heroism earning them favor. As soon as they board, they know something horrible has happened.

My Thoughts: In terms of the plot and horror beats, *Dead Silence* is the most like *Event Horizon* (1997). Part investigation and part survival, this book gives equal time to both, giving the reader plenty of eerie descriptions and heart-pounding action. The relational dynamic between crew members comes into play too, just like *Event Horizon*, and it gave me a little bit of *The Thing* (1982) vibes as well. Two favorite horror movies rolled into one deep-space ghost story.

Echoes of Frankenstein

What are the consequences of creating that which we cannot control? Mary Shelley buries this question deep into the heart of her timeless tale, *Frankenstein.* A heavy weight dropped into an endless dark pool of horror that sends its ripples out into the void. So many authors have been stirred by this rippling effect; prompted to tell their own tales of morally gray scientists on their quest for more knowledge, more notoriety, more power … closer to the ideal of a God than anyone should ever aspire to be. The books on this list are directly influenced by this iconic classic horror: a reimagining, blackout poetry, the story from a different character's point of view, and an illustrated graphic novel about Mary Shelley herself. Perfect for lovers of this Gothic science fiction classic who desire more Mary and more monsters!

Book Vibrations: *ambition, creation vs. creator, Gothic, greed & power, moral ambiguity, obsession, playing God*

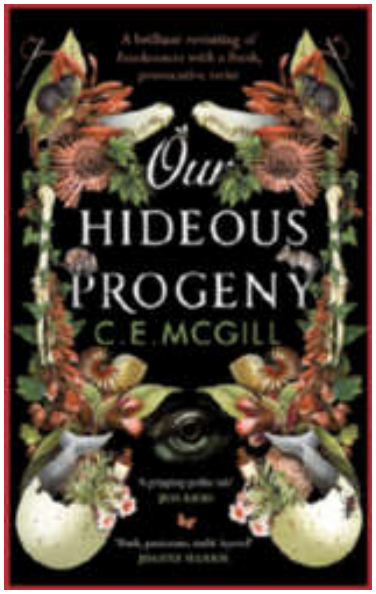
Mary's Monster: Love, Madness, and How Mary Shelley Created Frankenstein

Lita Judge
ROARING BROOK PRESS | 2018 | 320 PAGES

Let's start here with this underrated graphic novel hybrid, an illustrated tribute to Mary Shelley and the legacy she left behind for generations to discover and enjoy.

My Thoughts: If you're a *Frankenstein* fan or a lover of all things Gothic, *Mary's Monster* by Lita Judge is a book you absolutely need in your life. This isn't just a story; it's an immersive masterpiece that feels like being transported into the shadowy rain-soaked world where Mary Shelley birthed her monster. The combination of lyrical free verse and moody illustrations pulls you into Mary's life. It's a love letter to Gothic horror and a celebration of one of the genre's most iconic creators. *Mary's Monster* will make your Gothic heart ache in the best way.

Our Hideous Progeny



C. E. McGill (they/them) HARPER | 2023 | 400 PAGES

Expanding on the Frankenstein *mythos,* Our Hideous Progeny *is about Victor Frankenstein's great-niece, Mary Sutherland, a young paleontologist dreaming of making a name for herself among elite scientists in Victorian London. She is determined to bring to life a prehistoric creature for an exhibition. She is headstrong and ambitious—character traits traditionally held by men in her field of science. Dual*

narratives tell a past and present story of Mary's life, infusing her history with all the themes of Frankenstein *that classic horror buffs will appreciate.*

My Thoughts: I was pleasantly surprised that this story is not a retelling or reimagining of Shelley's classic science fiction horror novel. It's more of a spin-off, bringing something new and unique to the *Frankenstein* universe. The main character, Mary, is a fascinating woman married to a profoundly infuriating man named Henry. Their relationship echoed themes found in *The Essex Serpent* by Sarah Perry—an intelligent woman who desires to develop and explore her naturalist theories and scientific discoveries must filter everything through the men in her life, be it a husband, father, or otherwise. But Mary isn't without her flaws. I found it refreshing to invest in such a complex, authentic woman who is brave and bold but also weak and prone to making hasty decisions. I also enjoyed the coupling of feminism and queer representation against the backdrop of historical fiction. A brilliant and promising debut.

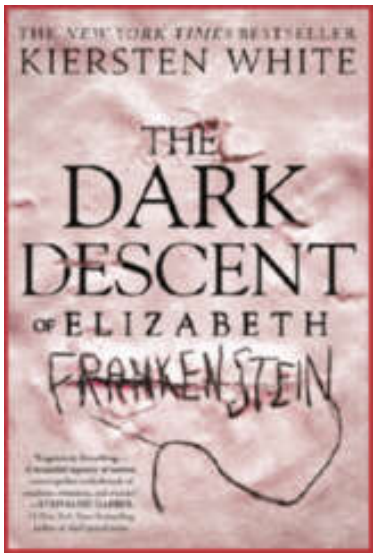
A Complex Accident of Life

Jessica McHugh
APOKRUPHA | 2020 | 124 PAGES

Explore over fifty original pieces of blackout poetry inspired by Mary Shelley's Frankenstein.

My Thoughts: This was my first time engaging with blackout poetry. Basically, the artist takes a full page of words written by someone else as their source material. They read and reread the material isolating key words and phrases to recreate a new piece in their own voice. Jessica McHugh doesn't just take a marker and cover all the words and sentences she won't be using in her poetry; she creates visual word art right there on each page. It's stimulating and pleasing to the eye and the mind—I enjoyed building little bridges from McHugh's poetry to my own thoughts and feelings on *Frankenstein.* Themes featured include isolation, rage, loneliness, feminism, and violence. A unique experience.

The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein



Kiersten White
DELACORTE PRESS | 2018 | 304 PAGES

Elizabeth Lavenza was rescued by the Frankenstein family from a terrible situation when she was a young girl. The family soon realizes Elizabeth is a soothing presence for their son, Victor, who is prone to exhibit disturbing and destructive behaviors. As the two grow older, Elizabeth's security is threatened when Victor disappears and she is considered no longer useful. She sets off with a friend to track him down and prove she can protect Victor from himself.

My Thoughts: This is for all the readers who love *Frankenstein* for the monster, the Gothic vibes, and the themes but always felt annoyed by Victor Frankenstein. Elizabeth is a far superior main character. This is a fulfilling way to celebrate the work of Mary Shelley and view the story through the lens of a woman protagonist. The evolution of Elizabeth from the start of her journey through to the end is a powerful example of modern, feminist Gothic storytelling and its importance in the horror genre.

Ladies of October : Vintage Horror

If you find yourself in a used paperback store, go to the horror section in the back. Browse those well-loved, worn-out, tattered, and torn spines for a title that jumps out at you. Slide it out to appreciate the cover artwork. They just don't make them the way they used to. Open the book and bury your nose deep in the crease of the yellowing pages. Horror books during this peak season of terror were at least three hundred pages! I feel sad that I missed out on some of the women writing horror at this time. That's why every October I make a habit of returning to horror's backlog of releases to discover some vintage (30+ years old) and classic horror books that I missed when I was a wee spooky freak. Here are some of my favorites.

Prepare to settle into these classic, vintage horror vibes.

> **Book Vibrations:** *'80s & '90s vibes, classic horror tropes, iconic horror, movie adaptations, Paperbacks from Hell, short stories, the book is better, the female gaze, women protagonists*

Spunk

Zora Neale Hurston (1925)
READ & CO CLASSICS | 2022 | 34 PAGES

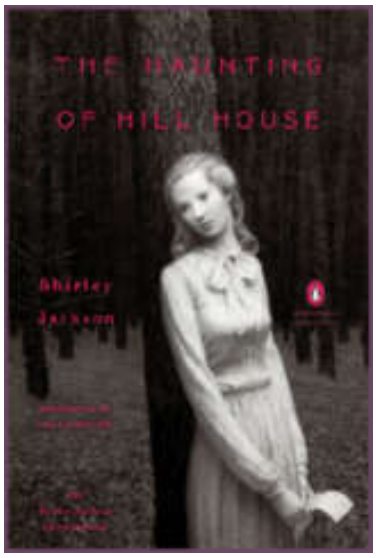
A short story about a local giant of a man, known simply as "Spunk," who is parading his lover around town. The woman is clearly married to a well-known man in town named Joe. Joe is telling anyone and everyone that he's going to end this guy with his straight razor.

My Thoughts: In the beginning of the edition that I read on hoopla with my bookish friend @nailahkingwrites (I hope you write a book someday!), there is a fascinating essay titled, "A Brief History of the Harlem Renaissance." I learned so much about the Harlem Renaissance between 1910 and 1930.

This was a cultural movement actively centering the creative talents of Black creatives, one of whom was Zora Neale Hurston. After reading the essay by an unnamed source, the short story "Spunk" begins. Zora's storytelling voice paints a vivid picture of the Village with colorful characters talking about the latest hot local gossip. She builds up the tension between two men fighting over one woman until suddenly, the entire story pivots into something completely unexpected. I was blindsided by that ending! The whole vibe reminded me of Season Four of *Fargo,* which takes place in Kansas

City, Missouri, depicting two warring crime syndicates and all the people who get caught in the crosshairs. If you enjoyed that show, or that kind of storyline, you'd love this story with the same essence at its core.

The Haunting of Hill House



Shirley Jackson (1959)
PENGUIN CLASSICS | 2006 | 208 PAGES

It feels weird to explain what this absolute icon of a book is about, but I also know that there is very real potential that some horror fans might not know about its importance to the horror genre or perhaps skipped it due to its age. So, if you did, the story follows a few people who have been summoned to Hill House by an occult specialist to see if they can have a shared or private paranormal experience. Let me assure you the storytelling style holds up against today's haunted house books. It reads like it could have been published yesterday and would've definitely made the modern New York Times *Best Seller list.*

My Thoughts: This book is a masterclass on atmospheric dread and psychological horror blending to create a chilling tension that lingers in your mind throughout the whole book. Reading this book for the first time about a decade or so ago unlocked a part of my horror-loving brain that had been missing. Navigate a truly horrific landscape through the lens of a female author writing a woman protagonist who is an "unreliable narrator," a flawed woman who is relatable and authentic. I never felt so seen in my journey as a horror reader. Truly this book has influenced a lot of my reading preferences and still has a huge influence on me.

INTERVIEW WITH THE VAMPIRE

Anne Rice
KNOPF | 1976 | 369 PAGES

A Gothic horror novel about a vampire named Louis who sits down with a journalist to tell the epic saga of his life spanning centuries. Louis is near death when a vampire named Lestat takes him into his care to be his immortal companion. The two vampires have opposing feelings about their lifestyle. Lestat embraces and indulges, while Louis is tortured and

brooding. Eventually, Louis takes a companion of his own, a young girl named Claudia. Conflict arises and elevates to a shocking conclusion filled with grief and loss and despair, all of which is being communicated to this journalist firsthand from Louis.

My Thoughts: This is another book that seems silly or obvious to include, as I'm sure anyone holding this book has either read this book or knows about it, but just on the off chance this is the first time you're hearing about it, let me encourage you to read it immediately! Forget any pop cultural reference or TV show or movie based on this book or any of the characters in the universe of vampires Anne Rice created. Just simply read this book in all its timeless glory. It's as immortal as Lestat himself. I have enjoyed this book several times in different seasons of life. It's iconic. Essential. Rice took everything we've ever gleaned from vampire fiction in the past and built upon the lore with a seductive and enchanting finesse that is still alive today. Every vampire novel that exists presently has been created with *Interview with the Vampire* in mind. It's the thread we use in the fabric of the vampire narrative. *Fun fact! This book came out the year and month I was born.

DEATH IN SPRING

Mercè Rodoreda (1986) translated by Martha Tennent
OPEN LETTER | 2015 | 150 PAGES

A nameless fictional town with a treacherous river running underneath it is the home of a fourteen-year-old boy. Through the boy's eyes, we witness the town's bizarre customs, history of violence and casual cruelty, and societal norms regarding familial relationships.

My Thoughts: This book was profoundly troubling to me. The storytelling style felt like reading a transcription from a documentary. I was immersed in the story of this village to the point of losing myself in it. I kept forgetting it was fiction. More than once, I was compelled to do some research, then remembered it didn't exist (thank goodness!). The descriptions of the setting and all the townspeople going about their daily activities are captured in vivid detail. I saw everything. There are feral children running around committing heinous acts without consequences, a criminal is locked away in a basket by the river, a machete-wielding man in a cave challenges the youth to fight him, and our narrator witnesses terrible things. I'll never forget the way this book made me feel. Rodoreda challenges the reader to leave behind our creature comforts—things we take for granted—and walk around in someone else's shoes.

The Missing

Sarah Langan
HARPERCOLLINS | 2007 | 400 PAGES

Lois Larkin takes her class on a field trip to the woods in the small town of Corpus Christi, Maine. One of her third-grade students, a creepy little freak named James Walker, goes missing. He awakens an ancient evil that infects unsuspecting people and turns them into zombies.

My Thoughts: A pitch-black dark evil, small-town survival horror, this story throws it way back to old-school ’80s horror paperback vibes but with modern twists. Langan’s style reminds me very much of King in the way she prioritizes the characters over the plot so that the reader is emotionally invested. *The Missing* is all about what realistic, average, everyday people will do as they face this unspeakable evil together.

Sarah Langan wrote paperback horror decades ago and she is still going strong writing some of my favorite suburban escalation

horror, like *Good Neighbors* (2021) and *A Better World* (2024).

When Darkness Loves Us

Elizabeth Engstrom (1985)
VALANCOURT BOOKS | 2019 | 234 PAGES

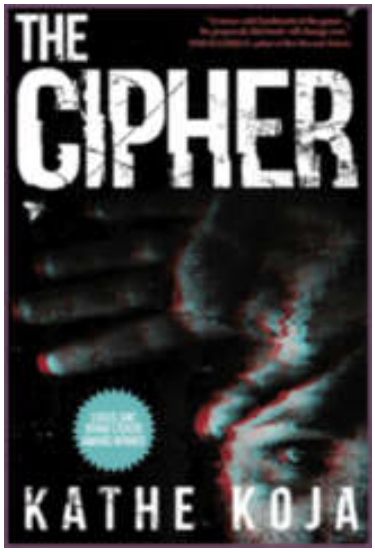
Two novellas are featured within this book with two women protagonists who each suffer a tragedy and must rely on their inner strength and their belief in love to survive. Psychological horror at its best! The first tale, When Darkness Loves Us, *is about a woman who falls into an underground tunnel system and must live in complete darkness as she tries to find a way to get back above ground.*

In Beauty Is, *Martha is locked away in her house, afraid to engage in a cruel, unsympathetic world. She is mentally and physically disabled, labeled a monster by the townspeople. A surprise visitor changes everything.*

My Thoughts: Elizabeth Engstrom is a brilliant storyteller; one of the genre's best-kept secrets, Engstrom doesn't just write horror; she writes humanity at its most raw and unflinching. This underrated volume is a double dose of devastating darkness. The titular story, *When Darkness Loves Us,* is a unique blend of Gothic and body horror, a masterclass in claustrophobia and existential terror, with themes of isolation, motherhood, and the ways society cages women. The second novella, *Beauty Is*, is its own brand of grotesque brilliance, with a rural Gothic vibe that peels back the layers of beauty, ugliness, and the horrors of small-town life. Engstrom's prose is deceptively simple, but it gets under your skin with a quiet ferocity.

These two stories feel deeply personal and unapologetically weird. I am so grateful to Valancourt Books for reprinting more of her work. I also read *Black Ambrosia* (1988) and purchased a short story collection, *Nightmare Flower* (1992), thanks to Valancourt's dedication to quality horror.

The Cipher



Kathe Koja (1991)
MEERKAT PRESS | 2020 | 236 PAGES

Nicholas and Nakota are loathsome people. They happen upon a strange black hole in Nicholas's apartment building and become obsessed with experimenting with it. Obsession, as we all know, does not end well, and horrible things do happen; mostly because Nakota is self-destructive, impulsive, and a bit of an emotional "black hole" herself. Nicholas is codependent and passive. The mystery of their relationship is as fascinating as the black hole the two affectionately and weirdly nickname the "Funhole."

My Thoughts: *The Cipher* is legendary—cult classic status. This is the book that grabbed the horror genre's attention in the early '90s. I feel like reading *The Cipher* is a horror reader's rite of passage. Some memorable classic horror scenes will stay with me forever: cringy sex stuff, gross-out transformations, and jaw-dropping moments. The Funhole starts off as a void the couple experiments with but quickly becomes an unhealthy obsession and ultimately a soul sucker. This is transgressive horror perfectly suited for fans of Clive Barker and David Cronenberg, but I think it's a disgusting good time for everyone who loves the dark side of chaos.

A Nest of Nightmares

Lisa Tuttle (1986)
VALANCOURT BOOKS | 2020 | 240 PAGES

This collection could best be described as "feminist horror," shelved next to modern short story collections, such as Her Body and Other Parties *by Carmen Maria Machado or* salt slow *by Julia Armfield. All the stories feature a woman protagonist experiencing some kind of disturbing or violent situation. The variety in these tales comes from the very different women and how they handle themselves in a trial. The outcomes vary.*

My Thoughts: The opening story, "Bug House," is indicative of the quality of reading experience you will get throughout the entire collection, although not all of the tales are as graphic or gruesome. Some of the stories are subtle terrors, exploring themes of anxiety or isolation. The ones about familial relationships are some of my favorites, like "The Other Mother" or "The Nest." Very bleak, disquieting stories, these will linger with horror lovers long after being read. A gold standard for female-centric storytelling. I bought two more of her collections after I read this one, *The Dead Hours of Night* and *Riding the Nightmare*, both available through Valancourt Books.

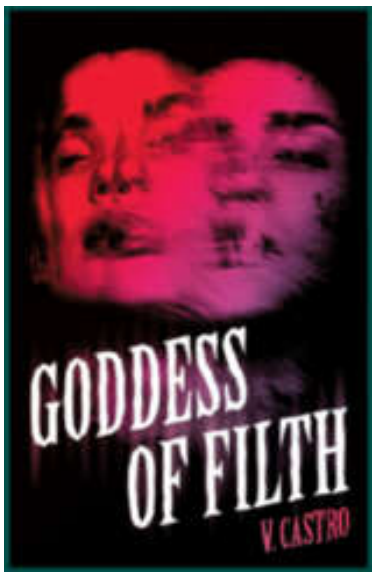
Dangerous Games

This list of stories revolves around teenage girls (in some cases, younger) or young women pushing boundaries, which drives them to engage in reckless behavior, such as performing rituals or taking part in dangerous challenges. Sometimes they experiment with summoning dark forces and evil entities they don't know how to

control. These games almost always reveal the darkness within themselves. What starts as innocent thrill-seeking, like playing with a Ouija board or calling on Bloody Mary, awakens a heady sense of power in one or more of the participants manifesting itself in further acts of manipulation or control. It's an intoxicating genre because it crushes stereotypes of innocence and weakness within young women and girls. It's the perfect setup for horror elements to rise in tandem with toxic friendships inside the context of group dynamics. Fierce competitions, peer pressure, and betrayal mix to create a powder keg of emotions ready to explode.

BOOK VIBRATIONS: *coming-of-age, dangerous games, dark academia, female friendships, female toxicity, obsession, paranoia, power dynamics, young women*

GODDESS OF FILTH

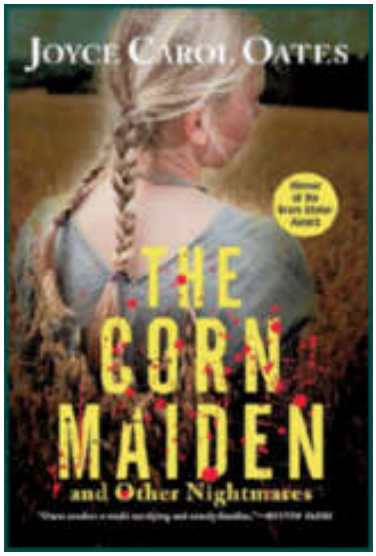


V. Castro
CREATURE PUBLISHING | 2021 | 156 PAGES

A few teen girls gather to channel their inner witch vibes and unintentionally conjure up an ancient goddess. After which, one of the girls begins exhibiting strange behaviors. This sudden presence in the friend group causes some concern among the girls and their parents. A priest is summoned, which only manages to make the situation worse and more dangerous.

My Thoughts: It will never cease to amaze me what some authors can do in such a short amount of time. *Goddess of Filth* is not a long book, but it leaves a lasting impression. The teen girls are all on the same path toward womanhood, some more eager to arrive than others. They struggle with their changing bodies, Mexican American identities, and new feelings about boys. Castro brings all this female energy together in one room on a hot night and conjures up a vengeful, enraged ancient goddess to throw the whole thing into a chaotic, complicated nightmare. Quite possibly one of the most original and entertaining takes on the classic possession horror trope.

The Corn Maiden and Other Nightmares



Joyce Carol Oates (2005)
MYSTERIOUS PRESS | 2011 | STORY "THE CORN MAIDEN"

I'm isolating one story, called "The Corn Maiden," from this collection. It's an alarming exploration of the fine line between childhood games and calculated cruelty. The story centers on the premeditated kidnapping of Marissa, an eleven-year-old girl, by fellow schoolmates who are led by the charismatic and manipulative Jude. What begins as a "game" rooted in local folklore spirals into something much darker. The "game" isn't just an act of bullying; it becomes a psychological experiment of dominance.

My Thoughts: This was my first time reading Joyce Carol Oates. I was captivated by her ability to expose the characteristics of group dynamics among teenage friends. Jude's persuasive power over those she estimates are weaker than her is chilling. Her belief in the myth of the Corn Maiden (a pagan harvest sacrifice) gives Jude just enough justification for her violence against Marissa. Oates doesn't just focus on this dangerous game gone too far, she also highlights the realities parents of missing children face too: a heart-pounding fight for information and leads before the trail runs cold. There is nothing more horrifying than a parent's race against the clock when the risk is so high. "The Corn Maiden" stands as one of the most engrossing introductions to an author's work I have come across in recent years. I'm excited to read more from this author.

JAWBONE

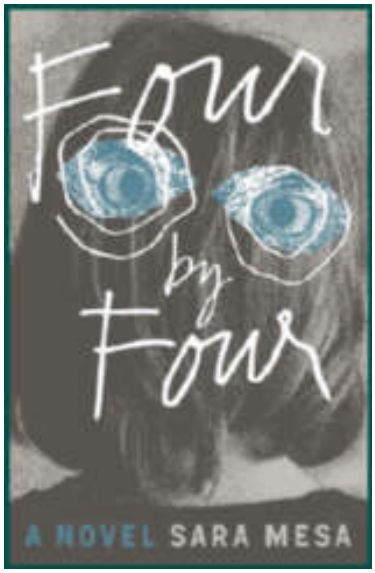
Mónica Ojeda (2018) translated by Sarah Booker
COFFEE HOUSE PRESS | 2022 | 272 PAGES

A friend group attending the Delta Bilingual Academy shares in strange ritualistic behaviors that escalate into violence and cause physical and mental harm to themselves and those around them. This chilling story about an intimate friend group of teen girls is a picture of how fierce and violent passion and obsession can be, at any age.

My Thoughts: *Big exhale* I can't believe I'm recommending this book to you. It's really messed up, just know that. There are multiple points of view giving an account of everything to do with this small group of girls on the cusp of womanhood. There is an account from their teacher, which is harrowing all by itself. Then you have the story of these two best friends who have a secret bond that goes deeper and darker (physically and psychologically) than either of them is willing to commit to at first but just seems to happen as the stakes get higher. One of the girls gives an account of events to a therapist. The reader doesn't get the therapist's side of the conversations, just the answers the girl is giving. It's the gaps in information that makes this point of view so compelling. I kept reading just to know what had happened. So many times, I thought

about quitting but then I had reached the conclusion and was relieved it was over. I listened to the audiobook—I'll never forget it.

FOUR BY FOUR



Sara Mesa (2012) translated by Katie Whittemore
OPEN LETTER | 2020 | 230 PAGES

Three acts with unique points of view and styles tell the story of Wybrany College, an isolated Spanish boarding school cut off from an increasingly violent dystopian world. The first part focuses on the college as a sanctuary for students with exceptional "quality" or elite circumstances. In part two, the narration is comprised of journal entries written by a newly arrived substitute taking the place of a teacher who has gone missing. The epilogue, part three, is the missing teacher's brief reflections detailing the mystery of what's really happening at the school.

My Thoughts: It's obvious that there is a pervasive unsettling vibe among the students and an unsettling atmosphere. I wondered if what was going on in the world was seeping into this sheltered school. The book explores themes of isolation, abuse of power and

position, society, and sexual manipulation. I love the way Mesa plays with obsession and the way people can express their dominance over vulnerable people, especially in times of crisis. The most unnerving aspect of this book was the way Mesa manages to draw the reader into the book in such an intimate, almost voyeuristic way. It made me uncomfortable, which I loved of course.

CRACKS

Sheila Kohler (1999)
OPEN ROAD MEDIA | 2023 | 162 PAGES

A South African boarding school is the setting for this dark academia thriller about an elite swim team comprised of privileged girls. One year, a student from Italy named Fiamma Coronna joins the team, disrupting the power dynamics between the students and their coach, as well as the delicate culture among the girls. Suddenly, Fiamma disappears and the truth of what happened to her surfaces at a reunion years later.

My Thoughts: It's important to note that the author shared on her website, "When my sister died a violent death more than forty years

ago in apartheid South Africa, my writing took a new turn. I was driven to explore the reasons for violence within intimate relationships, in particular, the abuse of power and privilege." *Cracks* highlights the abuse of power and privilege within intimate relationships. We follow the story of this elite swim team where the student athletes are obviously very close. I enjoyed trying to put the pieces of the puzzle together while observing these middle-aged women reflecting on a traumatic event. At first, it's unclear what happened to one of their classmates, but as the story continues, everything unravels, exposing the truth. This is a tangled web of all manner of illicit seductions and dangerous games.

The Hanging Game

Helen Marshall
TOR BOOKS | 2013 | 32 PAGES

The Hanging Game *tells the story of a wicked, potentially lethal game played between children of various ages where younger children are hung from a noose until they have a prophecy or vision to share, then they are cut loose.*

My Thoughts: Very Shirley Jackson(esque) in its mood and themes, it reminded me of "The Lottery." In some rural place called Hangjaw, with thick woods and blue mountains, all the menfolk work at logging camps surrounded by aggressive nature—bears, logging jams, and tree saws. The children, accustomed to stories of deadly accidents and men being overcome by man-eating bears, play their own version of deadly games of chance. It's an unsettling, intense short story that made me hold my breath in my chest until I felt a tightness, warning me to breathe.

The Dead Girls Club

Damien Anjelica Walters
CROOKED LANE BOOKS | 2019 | 288 PAGES

Four friends form a Dead Girls Club where they get together to talk about true crime stories, serial killers, and, well … dead girls. They also talk about parents, music, movies, and their changing bodies. Even though the girls all hang out in a group, the story focuses on the best friend relationship between Becca and Heather. Heather's home life is healthy and normal, but Becca comes from an unstable household where there

are acts of neglect and abuse. Becca becomes fixated on telling her friends stories of The Red Lady at their Dead Girls Club. Ultimately, it's her obsession with The Red Lady that leads to a tragic and mysterious event—ending both club meetings and friendships. Thirty years later, Heather is suddenly haunted by the past.

My Thoughts: I love coming-of-age books with teenage girls. We have so many horror books with boys riding bikes facing demonic clowns or demented serial killers but not nearly enough stories of girls doing the same thing. (I was so thankful for this book's release in 2019. There weren't a lot of coming-of-age stories revolving around the secret lives of girls at the time.) This story also utilizes a dual timeline to tell what happened when the characters were young and then what is going on in the present day related to what happened in the past. Both timelines have a magnetic pull to keep you turning the pages. There is an overwhelming sense of dread and curiosity as the author holds the cards close to her chest, hiding the big reveals until the climax.

The Kids Are Not Alright

I have been fascinated by the idea of creepy kids since I watched the *Bad Seed* (1956) with my mom so many years ago. The film is about an eight-year-old girl named Rhoda who is a murderous little sociopath in a cute dress and pigtails. She has everyone duped except Leroy, the caretaker. He says this memorable line about how someday, Rhoda will get caught for all the bad things she does to people and tells her they have electric chairs for that. "Little blue ones for boys and little pink ones for girls." I'll never forget the banter between Rhoda and Leroy. And maybe I love creepy kid horror because I'm always looking for a little more of that somewhere. A fresh-faced, perfectly adorable child with a rotten-to-the-core middle. Your chances of being killed by a child are slim, but never zero.

Book Vibrations: *creepy kids, despicable acts, domestic drama, fears & phobias, marriage, motherhood, paranoia, parenting, psychological*

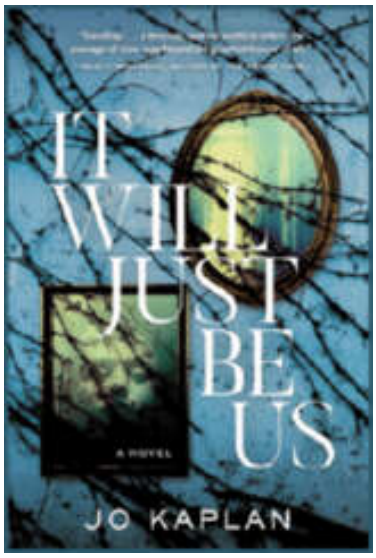
The Worst is Yet to Come

S. P. Miskowski
TREPIDATIO PUBLISHING | 2019 | 208 PAGES

This book has so many secrets. In the fictional town of Skillute, Washington, fourteen-year-old Tasha Davis is bored. A new classmate, Briar Kenny, shows up at her high school and the two are magnetically drawn to each other. An unexpected act of violence awakens something that has been dormant in their town for a long time, and the teen girls must face this town's haunted history together.

My Thoughts: *The Worst Is Yet to Come* by S.P. Miskowski is one of those hidden gems that hits you like a sucker punch. It's a small-town horror story drenched in some kind of dreadful creeping menace. Miskowski's writing is so intentionally intimate, it feels like she's peeling back the layers of her characters' lives to show you how rotten things really are underneath. The tension builds like a steam engine you can't outrun. If you're into horror that's deeply unsettling, achingly human, and brimming with atmosphere, this one belongs on your shelf. Miskowski is a master, and you need to get on board.

It Will Just Be Us



Jo Kaplan
CROOKED LANE BOOKS | 2020 | 272 PAGES

The main character, Sam, lives with her mother in the Wakefield family estate. The house is positioned at the edge of a swamp filled with history. The estate remembers everything that has gone on, absorbing every detail so it can play back history for its current residents in paranormal detail,

driving generations of Wakefields mad. Sam's pregnant sister shows up one night after she has a fight with her husband Don and asks to stay. Sam notices a new ghost in the house, a cruel faceless boy who terrorizes the other ghosts and seems able to haunt the past and the present.

My Thoughts: This is one of the best and scariest Gothic horror books I have read by far. There are scenes that I am glad I didn't read at night before turning out the lights to fall asleep. Such a unique concept as well: a house that captures memories and plays them back. The addition of this unfamiliar ghost without a face was so creepy! And the fact that he was messing with the historical timeline was unsettling—I had this overwhelming sense of dread anytime Sam saw this new ghost. Content warning for animal cruelty: There are some scenes in which animals are subjected to various acts of violence that I sort of skimmed over (birds, frogs, etc.). I will be looking over my shoulder and afraid of basements, swamps, and mirrors for the rest of my life now.

Baby Teeth

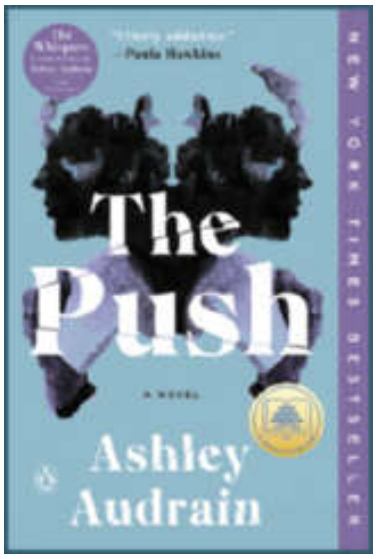
Zoje Stage

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS | 2018 | 304 PAGES

Suzette is a stay-at-home mother battling symptoms of Crohn's disease while also caring for their seven-year-old daughter Hanna, who has been so disruptive and violent at school that Suzette must homeschool her. The father, Alex, works outside the home, so he is unable to witness Hanna's abnormal behavior. Things between Hanna and Suzette are escalating to the point that Suzette no longer feels safe in her own home with her daughter. This is driving a wedge between Suzette and Alex.

My Thoughts: This book gave me tangible anxiety. Hanna's behavior is so cruel and calculated. Poor Suzette is so weak and exhausted, she doesn't stand a chance; plus she's obviously trying to believe the best about Hanna—no mother wants to think their child is a dangerous sociopath. Especially since Hanna is so young. I think some readers will have a difficult time suspending disbelief so they can enjoy Hanna's unpredictability and her father's unwillingness to believe Suzette, but I thought it was deliciously wicked and compelling. I had to know what would happen; I could not put this book down.

THE PUSH



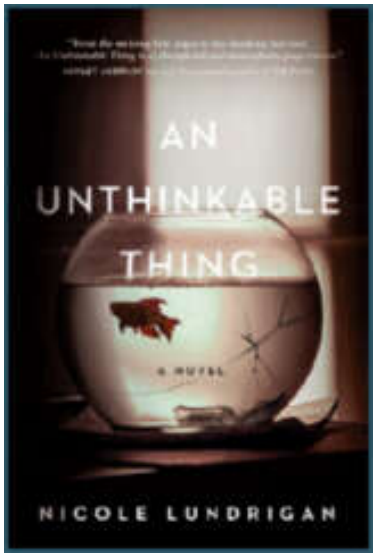
Ashley Audrain
PAMELA DORMAN BOOKS | 2021 | 320 PAGES

Three accounts of motherhood are examined in this propulsive psychological, domestic horror thriller. Blythe Connor desperately wants to be a good mother. She's so preoccupied with every little thing that it causes some difficulties in her marriage and affects her mental health. When their daughter is finally born, Blythe is disappointed in her inability to bond with her daughter and, as she gets older, Blythe suspects there is something off about her, but her husband Fox is dismissive. Things come to a head after the birth of their second child.

My Thoughts: Blythe's psyche during pregnancy, early motherhood, and later parenting a difficult child is painfully vulnerable. Her deepest, darkest fears and anxieties are laid bare for us to pick over and judge. Society can be such a harsh critic with all its expectations of women—how motherhood should feel and what a good mother looks like. There is this underlying pressure for women to measure up to an impossible standard of desiring motherhood, managing pregnancy with ease, and parenting with nurturing intuition that's supposed to come naturally. Blythe's inability to execute gracefully on any of these things is alarming to everyone she encounters in this book—a true reflection on how isolating it

can be to be a woman struggling with these situations. I loved my journey through this book examining the female experience through the comfort of horror fiction. Plus, the idea of raising a child that seems off—having to suspect them of despicable acts of cruelty—is a horror no parent should have to endure. A nightmare. (This would also be a great book to pair with the Maternal Instincts list.

An Unthinkable Thing



Nicole Lundrigan
VIKING | 2022 | 352 PAGES

With the story set in the 1950s, young Tommie Ware lives with his aunt in a cramped apartment. She's a nurse. They have a sweet relationship—she's raising her nephew since his mother works at a large estate for a wealthy family. When tragedy strikes, Tommie must leave everything he knows to live with his mother at the Henneberry family estate. Soon, poor Tommie is absorbed into the secret lives of Dr. Henneberry, his strange wife, Murial, and their sixteen-year-old son, Martin.

My Thoughts: This book does not have nearly enough love. I started it in the afternoon of a lazy Saturday, and it kept me glued to its pages until I finished it the next day. I wish I could accurately describe the anxiety I felt the entire time I was reading this book. Readers know at the very beginning of the novel (so this is not a spoiler) that Tommie is accused of murdering the Henneberry family. As the backstory plays out, the author keeps the secrets of this story close—how could Tommie possibly be responsible for this crime (the odds are unlikely, but never zero). The author does an amazing job peeling back the layers a little at a time.

Sisterhood

This list is reserved for that intense, formidable bond between siblings threatened only by each other. A tapestry of history woven by soft, worn threads of time and shared experiences. A connection to each other through fate or destiny binding them with blood relation but also by an unbreaking covenant of loyalty. As time moves on and the childhood home fades away, the sisterhood is tested by outside forces. The trust that was established in formative years gives way to doubts and second guesses. The person or people that you knew so well have new identities formed apart from the family dynamic. These stories shine a bright light on a sacred relationship forged in memories, shared secrets, and love.

Book Vibrations: *betrayal, cursed, dark & moody, domestic drama, family secrets, grief, historical, loss, loyalty, magical realism, obsession, parents, psychic trauma, psychological, sisterhood*

Itzá

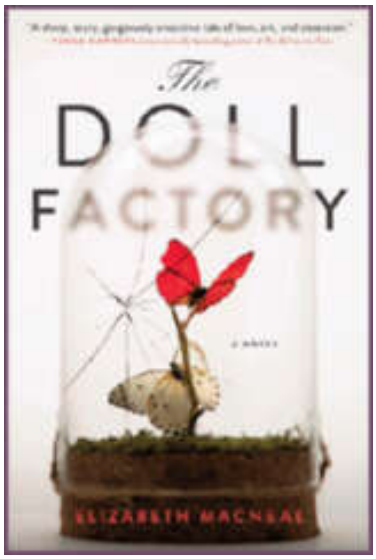
Rios de la Luz
BROKEN RIVER BOOKS | 2017 | 164 PAGES

Lyrically told, this debut novella is about a small family of women living in a place of their own called Mango House near the US border with Mexico. It's a coming-of-age story about family, identity, sisters, generational trauma, magic, and survival.

"The house became a place of saying nothing that I meant."

My Thoughts: It's mind-blowing how much warmth and intimacy the author can leave on the page. The main character chronicles the death of two matriarchal influences in her young life, her complicated feelings about her mother, the bond of sisterhood, and a detailed account of the way she fights to survive the overwhelming despair and psychological trauma of sexual assault. A harrowing, vulnerable, and beautiful story about "water witches"—if you are a fan of Tiffany McDaniel's books, *Betty* and *On the Savage Side,* you are the audience for *Itzá.*

The Doll Factory



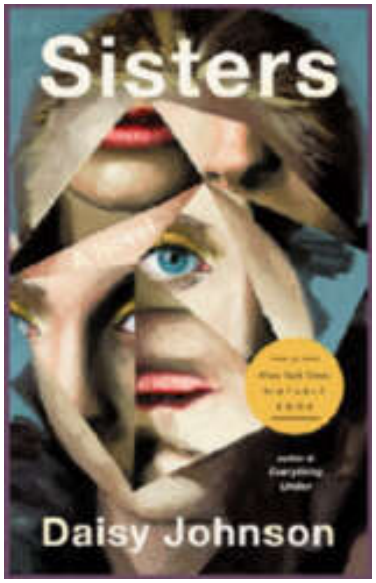
Elizabeth Macneal
ATRIA | 2019 | 368 PAGES

Sisters Rose and Iris work in a doll shop owned by an abusive elderly woman. All they do, day in and day out, is paint faces on dolls. Rose is reclusive after a severe illness left her skin pocked. Iris longs for freedom from their dire circumstances, then her path crosses with two different men: Silas, a local taxidermist who is obsessed with the macabre and oddities, and Louis, a local artist. Both men take a liking to Iris and have within them the ability to change the course of her life forever.

My Thoughts: I will forever chase the high of listening to this audiobook, one of my new favorite reading experiences. I will caution you up front: There is a lot of animal cruelty in this book due to the nature of the character Silas and his fascination with oddities and taxidermy. This is an intricately plotted story with so many twists and turns—shocking moments of discovery, truly spine-tingling scenes, and the suspense is remarkable. I went on extra-long walks just so I could keep going. I never wanted this to end. I had such a horrible bookish hangover after finishing that I had to find

another book with these vibes to keep the party going. A new all-time favorite book.

SISTERS



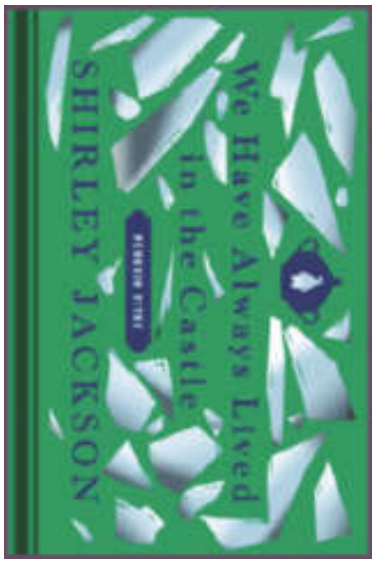
Daisy Johnson
RIVERHEAD BOOKS | 2020 | 224 PAGES

Two sisters, September and July, are ten months apart. They are fiercely loyal to each other and inseparable. The book is narrated by the younger sister, July. Her sister, September, is the dominant one. Readers know something happened at their school and that their mother is running away to an isolated beach cottage. She has separated herself from her daughters and seems depressed. The dark interior timeline moves backward and forward, randomly giving readers small glimpses—clues—into what has really happened.

My Thoughts: I listened to the audiobook. It was a deeply intimate experience because of the soft-spoken narrators with their beautiful accents speaking directly into my ear as I listened with my

headphones. It's as though you, the reader, are a fly on the wall observing the very private lives of this family, the sisters and the mother—their behaviors and their dynamic that nobody on the outside would ever get to see. It feels almost like an invasion of privacy, and you're not sure what the author is going to reveal to you. It feels so private, voyeuristic, so unsettling, even though you're not sure why. But there are clues … breadcrumbs … hints of what's to come. Absolutely beautiful writing, a unique storytelling style, and a strangely morose atmosphere envelop the reader completely in this haunting, psychological, coming-of-age Gothic tale.

We Have Always Lived in the Castle



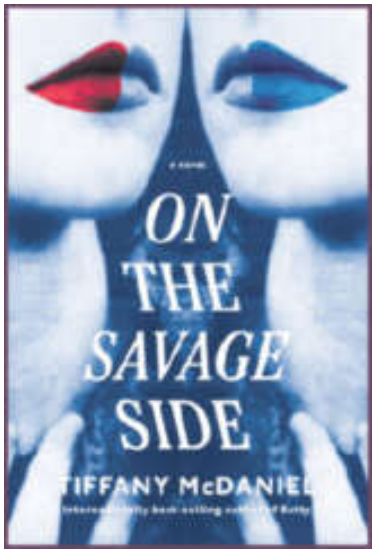
Shirley Jackson
PENGUIN GROUP | 1962 | 162 PAGES

When I summarize a classic book, I always feel like I have to say, "Okay, okay, let's just zoom in with the essential plot and then we can take several steps back from it for the bigger picture." We Have Always Lived in the Castle *is told from the point of view of a teenage girl*

named Merricat Blackwood, who lives at her family's estate with her sister, Constance. Several years ago, most of the family died at the dinner table when they ate poisoned sugar. Constance was suspected but never arrested for murder. They spend most of their days isolated at the Blackwood estate with their Uncle Julian (who survived the poisoning but is frail and not well).

My Thoughts: Quintessential Gothic horror storytelling with a cursed family, this story presents Constance as the Gothic heroine with a possible sinister side and Merricat as this idealistic, somewhat delusional romantic who doesn't quite seem to have a grasp on reality. I was astounded at the depth and nuance Jackson managed in so few pages. Merricat and Constance were victims of a domineering, patriarchal family culture and somehow find themselves as heads of their own household, masters of their own destinies, but they are unsure of how to step outside the safety and familiarity of the Blackwood estate—until Charles shows up, a cousin who mysteriously makes an appearance after his father's death, casting suspicion on his motives. His arrival is important to the story, as he represents the system of oppression the sisters always come up against in their family, which is also a thread that ties all the stories on this list together.

On the Savage Side



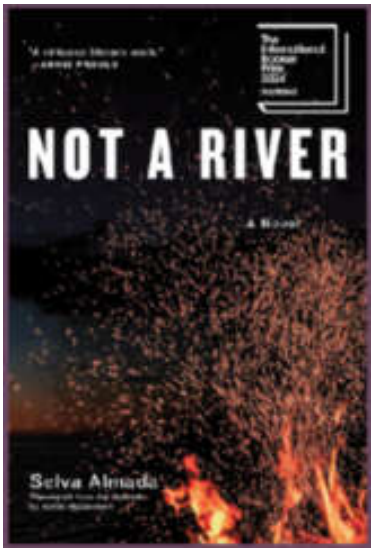
Tiffany McDaniel
KNOPF | 2023 | 464 PAGES

A coming-of-age tale, this novel was inspired by the true crime story of six women who went missing or were found dead in Chillicothe, Ohio. Twin sisters are being raised by their mother and aunt in poverty and violence. The reader comes to intimately share in Arcade (Arc) and Daff's struggle to survive their circumstances as the nurturing people in their lives come and go in a constant ebb and flow of instability. In their teen years, they make friends they can relate to, then one by one, something happens to these young women.

My Thoughts: This book is so heavy. The emotional labor required to read it is a big ask, I know. If you read Tiffany McDaniel's *Betty,* you already know exactly what I mean. McDaniel memorializes the tragic real-life women who were murdered, their cases never solved. The lyrical prose describes the magical, vibrant nature of young girls and women with their whole lives ahead of them. The way they are full of life and memories, dreams and aspirations,

imagination and wonder is set against the backdrop of harsh reality. Amid drugs, sex work, violence, and poverty, they are literally the most vulnerable prey in a playground for predators. Even the authorities don't care where they are, who they are with, or what will happen to them. A painfully realistic portrait of violence against women and girls.

Not A River



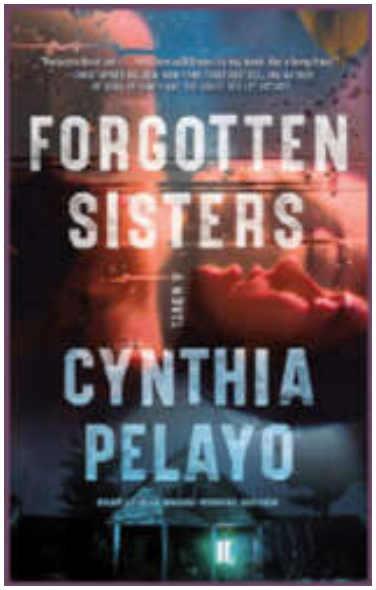
Selva Almada (2020) translated by Annie McDermott
GRAYWOLF PRESS | 2024 | 104 PAGES

There is so much subtext and many layers of storytelling. On the surface, a river. On one hand, you have a group of people disrespecting the land and its inhabitants when we witness a senseless act of violence. The local islanders catch wind of what has happened and move in on the outsiders to assess the situation. Back at the village, another story develops with two sisters getting ready for a big dance—at some point, there's a convergence that is altogether unexpected and unsettling.

My Thoughts: I read an interview with Selva Almada on the Booker Prize website where she gives a detailed account of the inspiration behind telling this story. It is deeply rooted in the political landscape of Argentina. Learning about it in the context of dark literary fiction like *Not A River* makes more of an impact than if I had read some articles or nonfiction books on the topic. I am so appreciative of all the work that goes into translating stories like this for an English-speaking audience.

Even without fully understanding all the subtext and nuance, the fictional account of these sisters and who they are and what happens because of them lit a little fire inside my reader's heart. I'll never forget this story or those young girls or that ray from the river that was hung in a tree.

Forgotten Sisters

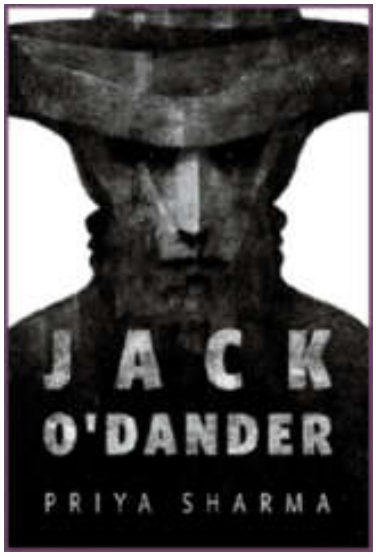


Cynthia Pelayo
THOMAS & MERCER | 2024 | 303 PAGES

Anna has a successful podcast focused on Chicago's haunting past. She lives in a historic home on the banks of the Chicago River with her sister, Jennie. Anna is concerned about her sister's strange behavior and isolation, while Jennie seems preoccupied with Anna's new relationship. Both sisters worry about a violent threat encroaching on them—a series of unexplained disappearances that has local authorities scrambling to make headway in the case, even knocking on their door for answers.

My Thoughts: Cynthia Pelayo's urban fairy tale weaves a web of Gothic melancholy with the use of lyrical prose to conjure a dreamy existence for the sisters forced to live in the harsh realities of modern city life. The sisters seem to be inexplicably connected by shared grief and trauma, but one sister is grounded and on the verge of a breakthrough while the other sister struggles to keep her head above water. This contrast binds the two together in a constant fight for dominance that keeps the reader locked into the turmoil with them. Will Anna ever be free? Or will the family curse and the weight of the past drown them both in sorrow? A beautiful, haunting fever dream of a story.

JACK O'DANDER



Priya Sharma
TOR.COM | 2023 | 34 PAGES

On a family vacation, an older cousin gathers all the kids around to show everyone a video of a man cloaked in shadow watching some children. When Natalie asks who the man is, the older kids tell the urban legend of Jack O'Dander—if you can see the shadowy figure in the video, it means he can see you too and he will abduct you, never to be seen again. Back-and-forth timelines tell the tale of a sibling forced to live in the shadow of her sister who disappeared in the night during a family vacation when they all watched the video.

My Thoughts: This urban legend horror story creeped me out so much. The way the story progresses and peels down the layers of Natalie's psyche until the climax and startling conclusion is utterly arresting. The family dynamics are the centerpiece of this horrific tableau. Mother versus daughter. Sister versus sister. Parents versus children. It's almost as if they don't love each other at all. But to feel grief as deeply as they all do must mean that on some level, this family is bound together … by what, exactly, is what keeps the reader so invested until the very end. The perfect introduction to Priya Sharma's work, this story is free to read on hoopla and Reactor.

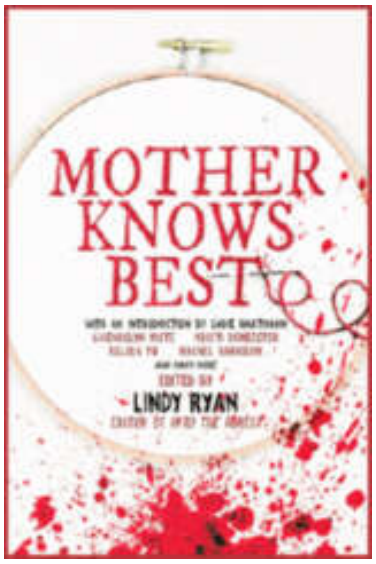
Motherhood in Extremis

These books do not hold back. They don't require permission from anyone to reveal monsters behind the mask of a mother. It's hard to see. Mothers are on a short leash. Societal norms have established acceptable behavior, and any mother stepping outside of those boundaries is exposed to public scrutiny and shame. The books on

this list explore the nature of mothers. Some of them are good mothers. Some of them are misunderstood. Some mothers are monsters, and some mothers are martyrs. It's exciting and challenging to read these stories about women in extreme duress and see how they survive … or don't. I will caution you and ask that you be mindful of the content. Everything under the sun is represented in these books.

Book Vibrations: *dark, desperation, disturbing, domestic violence, escalation, expectations, grief, honest, human monsters, motherhood, psychic trauma, raw, unflinching*

Mother Knows Best: Tales of Homemade Horror



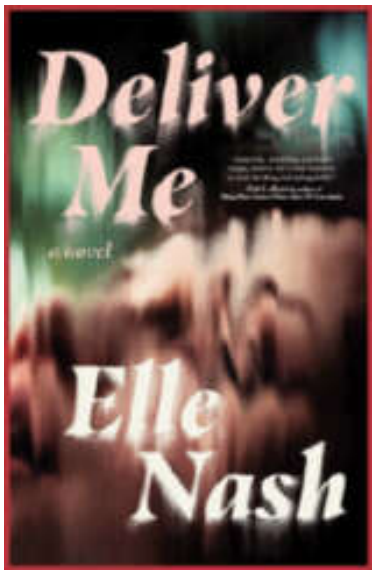
edited by Lindy Ryan
BLACK SPOT BOOKS | 2024 | 300 PAGES

Exclusive stories and poetry about bad mothers from women in horror, this is the perfect introduction to this list. You will go on a journey into

the darkness of dangerous women, broken psyches, and human monsters. My favorite aspect of this anthology is that all women have a mother. We might not all be mothers, but we were all born of one and that experience weighs heavy on our minds as we find ourselves (or don't, thankfully) in these stories of scary mothering.

My Thoughts: This is where I get to sing about the importance of anthologies thoughtfully and intentionally curated by talented editors. Lindy Ryan reached out to me with an invitation to write the foreword, which I accepted, so I was given the opportunity to read these stories in advance. I was immediately impressed by the diversity of the voices represented and the variety of storytelling and subject matter. Readers can use this anthology as an introduction to newer authors, such as Kelsea Yu and Caitlin Marceau, as well as more recognizable names like Gwendolyn Kiste, Kristi DeMeester, and Rachel Harrison. This is the perfect example of how authors can interpret the same theme in wildly different ways. Not every interpretation makes its mark on every reader, but each story will find its intended audience, and that's the invaluable gift of a good anthology.

Deliver Me



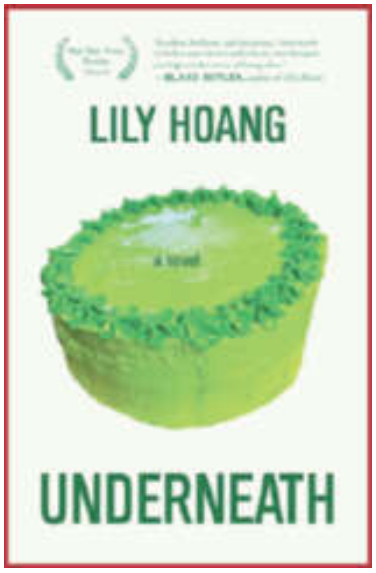
Elle Nash
THE UNNAMED PRESS | 2023 | 280 PAGES

Dee-Dee processes thousands of chickens at a meatpacking facility in the Missouri Ozarks. A strict patriarchal, evangelical religious upbringing has damaged Dee-Dee's sense of worth, purpose, and identity beyond repair. She's in a relationship with a live-in boyfriend she calls Daddy. All Dee-Dee wants is to be pregnant. She fantasizes about motherhood. After a series of devastating miscarriages, Dee-Dee is pregnant. With uncanny timing, her friend Sloane moves into the same apartment building after being gone for decades. This resurrects complicated feelings Dee-Dee has suppressed for years.

My Thoughts: Dee-Dee is unflinchingly raw and real, fully informed by the religious fundamentalist worldview/context she was raised in. The reader intimately bears witness to all the ways this toxic, abusive environment has produced ignorance, immaturity, stunted growth, and ultimately, severe mental illness. It's frustratingly tragic and mesmerizing. I couldn't put it down. This book had me in its grip until the final page and long after I finished. Due to explicit psychological trauma, heavy themes of pregnancy-related issues, and graphic violence, it's difficult to recommend this book to a

general audience, but if you feel up to the challenge, it's an impressive, thought-provoking debut.

UNDERNEATH



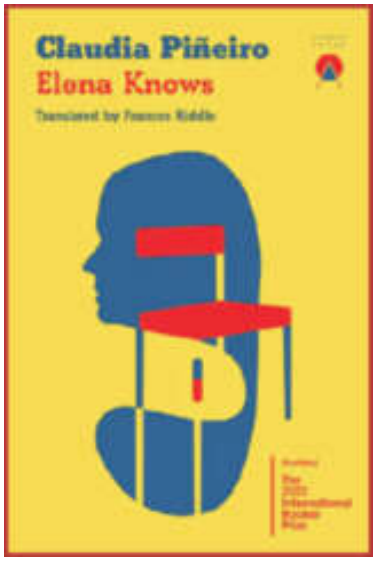
Lily Hoang
RED HEN PRESS | 2021 | 264 PAGES

Underneath *is a harrowing story of the making of a monster. Martha Johnson suffers from childhood obesity and is the daughter of an unloving, abusive, physically beautiful sex worker. Every day she endures the psychological hardship of relentless bullying at school then comes home to suffer the same torture. Martha devours every violent act, every word of hate, every injustice. She grows up, has children with unloving men, and releases all the darkness stored up inside her onto her own children.*

My Thoughts: I don't know why I read this book. It's honestly too much. It was exactly what I expected from reading the synopsis. Not to mention the author was inspired to write this book after reading a true crime case of a mother who murdered all of her children by

suffocating them with her own body, so she is sent to prison. Yet, I was compelled. I applaud the work Lily Hoang did with *Underneath.* She imagined the inner turmoil of a mind spoiled by the harsh cruelties of an unloved woman in an uncaring world forced to reckon with overwhelming psychological and physical trauma all on her own. A very sympathetic, terrifying monster capable of the worst abominations. This book is narrated by the ghost of her eleven-year-old daughter, her last victim before she was incarcerated. Heavy, brutal, but unflinchingly real, the kernels of truth were worth mucking around in the darkness to find.

Elena Knows



Claudia Piñeiro (2007) translated by Frances Riddle
CHARCO PRESS | 2021 | 143 PAGES

An elderly woman named Elena is on a sacrificial mission to investigate her daughter's death despite severe physical limitations due to advanced Parkinson's disease. Rita's body was found in a church bell tower and ruled a suicide; case closed. Elena knows her daughter was murdered because Rita would never go to that church during a storm. She is

determined to interview everyone Rita saw before she died, including a woman that Rita had a chance encounter with.

My Thoughts: I was seriously underprepared for the emotional weight this book required my heart to carry. It is so much more than a mother with a debilitating disease searching for answers concerning her daughter's death. There are so many layers for readers to peel back in a short amount of time: themes of natural motherhood and unnatural motherhood, the fragility and endurance of the human mind, suffering, grief, injustice, obligation and duty, and the emotional/physical labor of caregiving. There are so many scenes that stand out in my mind as vivid snapshots of womanhood —unique to our experience, but also circumstances everyone can relate to, like our struggles to advocate for our health against the monolithic enterprise of the pharmaceutical industry. The number one fear of most people is something horrible happening to our loved ones, and this book doubles down on this fear in multiple ways. Be warned.

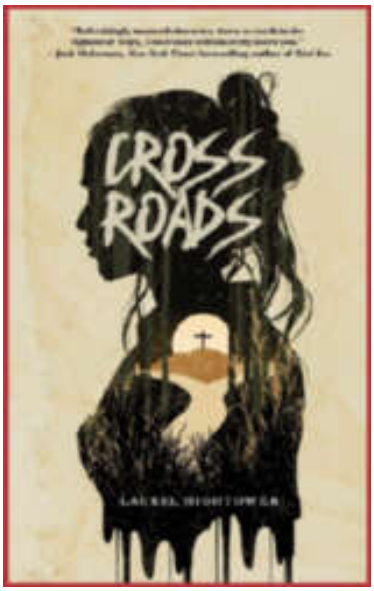
Idle Hands

Cassondra Windwalker
AGORA BOOKS | 2020 | 224 PAGES

Perdie summons the courage to leave her abusive husband with their three children. She has no idea what is in store for them in the future, but she does know for sure that staying with the father of her children will ultimately end in tragedy. Years go by, Perdie finds love and safety. Suddenly, a life-altering event happens, leaving Perdie to wonder if she made the right choice to change the direction of her family's lives. And through it all, a dark supernatural entity watches everything unfold, waiting for an opportunity to make a deal.

My Thoughts: This book was such a surprise. I had no expectations going into it, so I was thrilled to discover this hidden gem. Fair warning: The subject matter could be particularly difficult for readers who are sensitive to domestic violence, both spousal and child abuse. Sometimes the most memorable aspect of a good book is the storytelling voice, and such is the case with *Idle Hands.* The sections narrated in the voice of the dark supernatural entity are mesmerizing. I was captivated by the insidious nature of the relationship between this diabolical mastermind and this poor, unsuspecting woman named Perdie. As events unfold, the sense of foreboding and dread intensify. Toward the end, I wasn't sure I wanted to keep turning the pages, but of course, curiosity always wins. A unique and dramatic story.

CROSSROADS



Laurel Hightower
OFF LIMITS PRESS LLC | 2020 | 124 PAGES

Crossroads *follows Chris, a grieving mother whose life was shattered by the death of her son, Trey. When a small, inexplicable supernatural moment occurs at the site of his death, Chris begins a harrowing descent into grief-driven desperation and the dark, unholy bargains she's willing to make.*

My Thoughts: This book is about loss, sacrifice, and the gut-punch of parental love turned monstrous. The emotional rollercoaster of this book is unrelenting. Be prepared to experience a wide range of uncomfortable emotions from love to loss and devastation to desperation. Hightower doesn't shy away from sending tidal wave after tidal wave to crash down on her readers. Chris's pain is raw and unfiltered, leading her down a spiraling path into darkness. A taut study of grief in a small, tidy package of horror, it's unforgettable.

Maternal Instincts

Human instincts are as ancient and powerful as the blood in our veins. A primal fire burning inside each of us—hot and fierce. But maternal instincts, those belonging only to mothers, to nurture, to protect, to sacrifice, is a melody as old as time, a lullaby that soothes the soul. But oh, how easily that note sours. What begins as sacrifice or devotion can easily curdle into obsession. Apron strings drawn so tight they choke. An embrace so loving it can smother. Instincts felt so strongly they do more harm than good.

Or what if the instincts aren't felt? The maternal call to love and nurture is too soft or whispers words of failure and rejection. These feelings can turn and twist, fashioning themselves into a blade that mother can wield upon her children to relieve her own pain of inadequacy, a timeless and vicious circle.

Too much or too little—these horror stories tell tales from both sides of the sword.

Book Vibrations: *birthing, children, generational trauma, hormones, motherhood, parenting, pregnancy, romance*

On the Subject of Blackberries

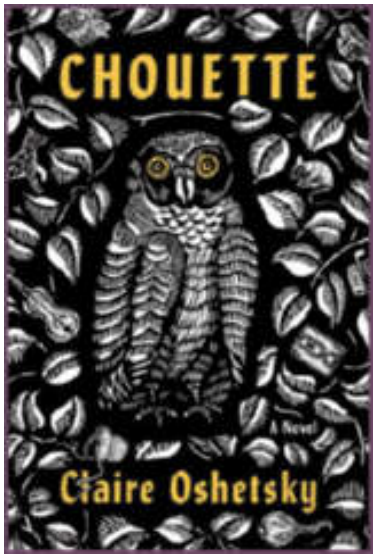
Stephanie M. Wytovich
RAW DOG SCREAMING PRESS | 2023 | 126 PAGES

A Bram Stoker Awards® winning, vulnerable and intimate poetry collection about motherhood, this book closely resembles witchcraft incantations performed with melodies or song—a witch's personal grimoire. Read out loud, they take the form of ceremonial bewitchery. I felt entirely spellbound while reading.

"I was a ghost existing in the corner of my house."

My Thoughts: Stephanie M. Wytovich's work digs at the soil of her psyche and exposes the raw roots of new motherhood. Using her love for Gothic fiction, Wytovich reaches for echoes of Shirley Jackson's *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* and the spectral figure of Merricat. Instead of lullabies, she whispers rhymes of blackberries and poison to her newborn daughter. Through her poetry, Stephanie gives shape to the silent, domestic terrors that many women are forced to endure, unleashing frustrations that give way to rage and rebellion. I love how these poems reject the quiet compliance that society demands. As both mother and writer, she gives life to her daughter and her thoughts birthed into words.

CHOUETTE



Claire Oshetsky (they/them)

ECCO | 2021 | 256 PAGES

The child in this novel is an owl, born from a person. Plain and simple. The story is told from the perspective of the mother. Her name is Tiny. Tiny informs her husband that she has an owl-lover and because of their intimacy, is now pregnant with an owl-baby. Readers follow Tiny on her journey as an outsider experiencing motherhood for the first time with nobody else in this world who has experienced it in quite the same way.

My Thoughts: *Chouette* is a fairy tale. I read it in the same way I engage with a Wes Anderson film, taking it all in at face value. It's impossible to read something like this without reading too much into it or trying to assign hidden meanings, but I recommend doing so—the author has expressed in interviews that readers/reviewers say, "This is a book about raising a queer child" or "This is a feminist book" or "This is about autism" and they delight in these responses, but none of those things were intentionally infused into

the storytelling. It's just a story written for readers to enjoy however they want—it's entirely open for interpretation and readers can expect to be challenged to draw their own conclusions. Which would be perfect for a book club—every reader is going to engage with this story differently. Universally though, I feel like this is an important book about motherhood because it represents all the doubts and insecurities mothers face when raising a child in crisis. A darkly humorous, slightly unsettling, strange and unusual story, this just cannot be missed.

Just Like Mother

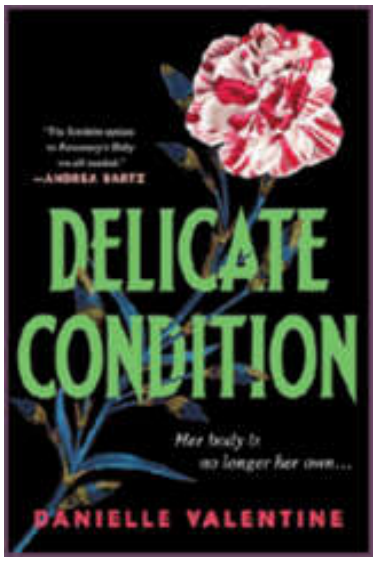
Anne Heltzel
TOR NIGHTFIRE | 2022 | 320 PAGES

Maeve and Andrea are cousins, practically twins—they resemble one another and they're very close. They grew up together in a radically feminist cult. During a tragic, harrowing event, Maeve escapes and is adopted into a normal family. Many years later, Maeve still thinks about Andrea and searches for her. One day, looking through the results of some DNA testing, Maeve is able to find new information about Andrea.

The cousins are reunited, and Maeve slowly learns what Andrea has been up to all the time they've spent apart.

My Thoughts: Maeve is an interesting and complicated character who is so totally unlike me; it was tough to relate but it didn't matter because she kept me on my toes trying to guess what she was going to do next or how she would react in a situation. Maeve and Andrea's childhood history with the cult is so fascinating and the brief glimpses we get go a long way to explain Andrea's current situation and her involvement with the new technology behind the lifelike AI doll babies that Andrea has in her secluded home. There is a surprising amount of sex in this book with zero hints about that in the synopsis, so consider this your heads-up.

Delicate Condition



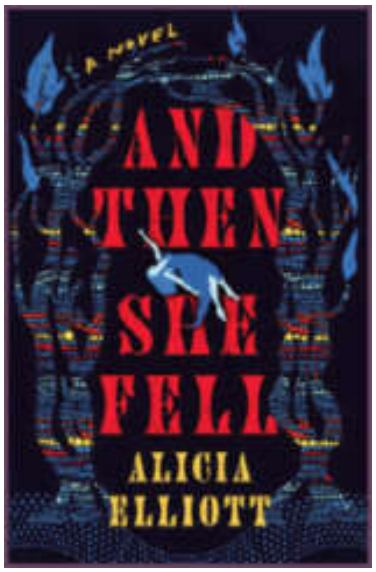
Danielle Valentine
SOURCEBOOKS LANDMARK | 2023 | 432 PAGES

The hype of this novel as the "Fiercely feminine millennial heir to Rosemary's Baby*" by* Publishers Weekly *is spot on. Anna Alcott is*

living her best life as an actress who is finally coming into her own and receiving the accolades she has always desired, but her primary focus is on having a baby with her husband. They suffer through their in vitro fertilization (IVF) journey together, but it's Anna whose body must endure the physical and emotional demands of miscarriage and negative pregnancy tests. Not to mention, Anna is sure she's being stalked.

My Thoughts: I was immediately drawn into the life of Anna Alcott. She is an aging actress who is still very much active in the Hollywood scene. Her current project is getting a lot of buzz and attention, much to the delight of her agent, Emily. While the subject of miscarriages and infertility might be very triggering for some readers, for me, it was fascinating to learn of all the psychological warfare that goes on both internally and as a couple. My heart went out to Anna immediately. She's a very sympathetic character with everything she goes through. As the story progresses, Anna begins to suspect she is being stalked. This is where things get interesting. I loved keeping track of all the facts and clues so I could develop theories about what was going on. There were several moments when the author dropped something into the last part of a chapter that blew my mind and I had to keep reading. The short chapters and surprising twists make the four hundred pages go by fast. The ending is so incredible. Maybe one of my favorite horror fiction endings!

And Then She Fell



Alicia Elliott
DUTTON | 2023 | 368 PAGES

A flawed, young Indigenous woman named Alice is trying her best to manage her new life as a wife and a mother. She is finding it especially trying after the death of her own mother. Alice feels pressured under the heavy weight of expectations to grieve with grace and maturity, as well as keep up with all the demands of parenting. Her husband is an academic who studies Native American culture, yet she struggles with carrying on the traditions of her father to write modernized stories from their heritage. Eventually, Alice reaches the limits of how much stress and anxiety she can handle and begins losing her grip on reality.

My Thoughts: There was so much about Alice's story that I could relate to, having been a young mother and wife myself at twenty years old. Some of my favorite scenes were the ones with Alice and her family—all the cousins and her aunt getting together to laugh and tell stories. I also loved the unexpected introduction of a character named Peter. You'll see. But the horror element was especially noteworthy because the author fused together the horrors of colonialism on Native peoples with a colonialism of one's mind—an invasion of paranoid thoughts and madness.

Like Mother, Like Daughter

Few familial relationships have been written about in horror as much as the bond between mothers and daughters. The complex emotional and psychological alchemy is so unique for each individual relationship based on a history beginning in vitro. Because of the expectation for mothers to be nurturing and protective, dark and disturbing fiction often explores stories of mothers who have shirked their protective role, sometimes even acting as the predator or monster. I enjoy when the mother/daughter roles are reversed, and the daughter is expected to care for the mother, especially after a complicated, traumatic childhood. Because this is a list of horror books, sensitive subjects of generational trauma and abuse often arise during extreme duress or conflict. The supernatural or paranormal elements act as a catalyst for the mounting tension—much to the reader's delight!

> **Book Vibrations:** *behavioral issues, broken relationships or "no contact," childhood trauma, family dysfunction, grief, poor communication, repressed emotions, resentment or bitterness, secrets & lies*

Doll Crimes

Karen Runge
CRYSTAL LAKE PUBLISHING | 2019 | 222 PAGES

Doll Crimes *is the unflinching story of a teen mother and her daughter surviving homelessness through desperate acts. Our narrator is the daughter—everything is filtered through her thoughts, feelings, life experience, and context. She doesn't have a name other than what her mother calls her, "My girl," "Babe," or "Doll." There is also a string of men the mother brings into their lives who she tells her daughter to call "Uncle" and they call her "Little Miss," "Girlie," or "Sweetie." As one could imagine, a desperate young mother with a daughter living hand-to-mouth in the predator-prey world we live in will be a dark story filled with tragedy, abuse, and harrowing acts of survival.*

My Thoughts: I read this book over five years ago and I still think about it. It's one of the first indie horror stories I thought would make a great movie. Painful and awkwardly realistic, it's very cinematic in a gritty, raw, documentary-style way. I kept forgetting I was reading fiction. I wanted to reach through the page and rescue our narrator from a bad situation so many times. My emotions went through the whole spectrum of empathy, from rage and frustration to sadness and pity. This book isn't "extreme" or "splatterpunk" in its style, but it is full of triggering subjects so proceed with caution.

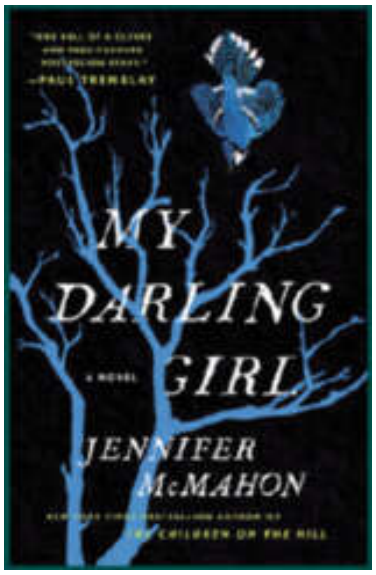
Bound Feet

Kelsea Yu
CEMETERY GATES MEDIA | 2022 | 116 PAGES

Best friends, Jodi and Sarah, bound together by grief and shared trauma, decide to sneak into Portland's Chinese Garden and Ghost Museum after hours to conjure the ghost of Jodi's dead daughter.

My Thoughts: Sometimes horror reflects our deepest darkest fears, and the scariest part of the reading experience is working up the nerve to engage with a story we know has the potential to bring us face-to-face with those fears. With parenthood comes a natural fear of losing our children. I read the synopsis of *Bound Feet* and wondered if I wanted to let Kelsea Yu inside my head to rearrange the furniture. Ultimately, I allowed it and I'm glad I did. The Chinese folklore and traditions, the beautiful sense of place, and the fierce powerful love of mothers is worth the emotional labor of wrestling with all of your messy feelings. Have a good cry—and a good scare.

My Darling Girl



Jennifer McMahon
GALLERY/SCOUT PRESS | 2023 | 320 PAGES

Alison's estranged mother, Mavis, is suddenly back in her life when Mavis makes a request to live out the rest of her terminal illness with Alison and her family during Christmastime. It's a difficult decision for Allison due to Mavis' abusive history. Eventually, Alison gives permission only to immediately regret it. Something is horrifically unusual about her mother. The holidays are going to be a literal nightmare.

My Thoughts: It's best to go into this horror novel completely blind. Even the back of the book gives too much away. Yes, something is very wrong with Alison's mother. If Alison had a good relationship with her, things would be easier, but the past is dark and ugly. Alison has buried memories of her childhood so deeply that when everything starts to rise to the surface, the trauma of it all serves as a catalyst for psychological horror. The fun is figuring out what it is and how digging into the mystery of it might cost the family more

than Alison bargains for. If you love complicated mother/daughter relationships and freaky old people, this book checks all the boxes.

A House with Good Bones

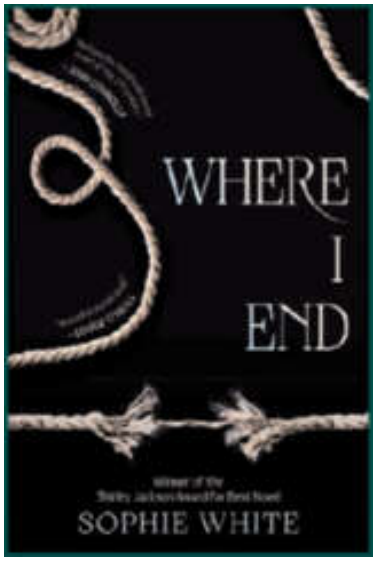
T. Kingfisher
TOR NIGHTFIRE | 2023 | 256 PAGES

Sam is excited to spend some quality time with her mother on an extended trip to her mother's quaint home and beautiful garden in North Carolina. Immediately upon her arrival, things seem off.

My Thoughts: This is perfect for when you are craving something a little less dark and brooding. It's a great summer read. Sam has a feisty, bubbly personality. Her asides and self-deprecating humor sprinkled throughout keeps the mood of the book on the sunnier side. She's an interesting dynamic character with her quirky worldview and specialized job as an archaeoentomologist (studies historical bugs). There's also witchcraft, family drama and secrets, and an exciting climax. I have fond memories of my audiobook experience because I listened to the whole thing, two hours at a

time over the three days I spent signing my books for a Night Worms package. Highly recommend!

WHERE I END



Sophie White
EREWHON BOOKS | 2024 | 256 PAGES

This novel is narrated by a young woman named Aoileann who lives on an isolated island off the coast of Ireland with her mother, Móraí, but is called, "The Bed Thing" by Aoileann. Life on the island is harsh and strange with peculiar rituals and casual violence. Refusing to see her life reduced to being her mother's full-time caregiver, Aoileann seeks answers to her mother's bizarre condition so she can understand what might become of her in the future. In the meantime, she meets a newcomer to the island, an artist named Rachel whose presence strikes a chord of longing and urgency in Aoileann.

My Thoughts: I have never read a book like *Where I End,* and I'm convinced I'll never forget this reading experience as long as I live. The imagery that comes with meditating on this story and the way I

feel right now just writing about it is so strong. There is this unsettling sense of dread, a lonesome, mournful heaviness that creeps into my heart. My mind flashes with the disturbing descriptions of the mother's physical state and the ugly, apathetic disdain Aoileann shows for her condition. There are things I want to say about the climax and conclusion that are just better left unsaid. Preserving those discoveries for your own journey with this book is essential. But tread lightly.

YA Horror from Women Authors —A Reading List Curated by Author Kelsea Yu

I had the pleasure of publishing two works by Kelsea: Her short story “I Swear I Didn’t Kill the Others” in *Human Monsters: A Horror Anthology* and her debut novella *Bound Feet.* Kelsea’s storytelling is a masterclass in understanding her audience and using that knowledge to surround them in an immersive atmosphere and lock in emotional investment. Her first YA novel, *It’s Only a Game*, released in July 2024. It’s a twisty thriller about a dangerous game that evolves into something all too real when Marina Chan and her friends are framed for murder … a deadly game she might not survive.

Here is Kelsea’s curated reading list of YA Horror by Women.

- *Such Lovely Skin* by Tatiana Schlote-Bonne
- *The Weight of Blood* by Tiffany D. Jackson
- *Horrid* by Katrina Leno
- *Wake the Bones* by Elizabeth Kilcoyne
- *What the Woods Took* by Courtney Gould
- *Their Vicious Games* by Joelle Wellington
- *The River Has Teeth* by Erica Waters
- *Helga* by Catherine Yu

Kelsea Yu is a Taiwanese Chinese American writer who is eternally enthusiastic about sharks and appreciates a good ghost story. Over a dozen of her short stories and essays appear in *Clarkesworld, Apex,*

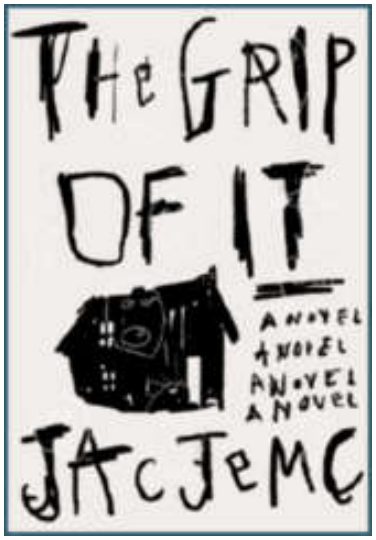
Nightmare, PseudoPod, Fantasy, and elsewhere. Her debut novella, *Bound Feet*, was a Shirley Jackson Award nominee, and her next novella, *Demon Song*, is published by Titan Books. Kelsea's first novel, *It's Only a Game*, is published by Bloomsbury. Find her on Instagram and Bluesky as @anovelescape or visit her website kelseayu.com. Kelsea lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, children, and a pile of art supplies.

Behind Closed Doors

I love complicated, dark explorations of a marriage that feels like it could be an A24 movie—creepy, eerie, goes way too far. I believe horror storytelling is a vehicle for authors to tell horrific marriage stories through the lens of fiction for the sake of truth. Marriage is not for everyone, but the institution does affect us all. All readers grew up with some kind of context or consequence of the choices our parents made regarding staying together under the context of some kind of union (good or bad, stable or unstable) or parents who did not stay together (good or bad, stable or unstable). Either way, we come to dark and disturbing books about marriage with individual, personal worldviews.

> **Book Vibrations:** *alternating POVs, darkly humorous, domestic drama, domestic violence, family dynamics, haunted, mental health, relationships, romance, trials & tribulations*

The Grip of It



Jac Jemc
FSG ORIGINALS | 2017 | 288 PAGES

This is the story of a couple with deeply rooted relational issues who move to a new house in the country with the hopes that the change of pace and scenery will bring them closer together. The author tells their marriage story through alternating points of view, keeping readers constantly wondering which character has a more accurate perspective of reality. The house, as well as the strange things that begin to happen, is just a catalyst for bringing the couple's issues to the surface.

My Thoughts: I love the quiet horror of this complex haunted house novel. I believe it would be so fun to read this book and *The September House* back-to-back because the wife character in each book handles their similar situations so differently. Jemc decides to present readers with a lot of questions and, to be quite up front, not all of them get answered. So, if ambiguity is not your favorite, you might want to skip this one. Like most marriages, this story has its ups and downs and unique nuances; nothing is tied up neatly with a little bow. Everything is open for interpretation and that's what I liked best about it. Perfect for a book club or buddy read.

Lady Killer

Joëlle Jones and Jamie S. Rich, illustrated by Joëlle Jones
DARK HORSE BOOKS | 2020 | 288 PAGES (GRAPHIC NOVEL)

Lady Killer *by Joëlle Jones and Jamie S. Rich is a stylish mash-up of 1950s domestic perfection and cold-blooded assassination. Josie Schuller is the ultimate housewife—cooking, cleaning, and caring for her family by day, while moonlighting as a ruthless contract killer by night.*

My Thoughts: Oh boy, get ready to smash that tradwife stereotype! Joëlle Jones was clearly inspired by vintage ads depicting happy housewives vacuuming or doing the dishes like it was their secret source of joy. The story follows Josie living the picture-perfect life with her handsome husband and their darling children. Hubby lives a simple life: He works, watches TV, and drinks beer, blissfully oblivious to the fact that his wife is a trained killer who excels in hand-to-hand combat. I read the compendium on hoopla, which allowed me to read it panel by panel so every detail comes into focus. That's really what this graphic novel is all about, the breaking down of the tradwife role with satire and *Kill Bill*-style violence all while letting your eyes feast on the exceptional artwork. Dazzling on all levels.

The Harpy

Megan Hunter
GROVE PRESS | 2020 | 208 PAGES

A seemingly happy young married couple with a few kids live in a bubble of financial security, good reputations, and wedded bliss until a phone call threatens everything.

My Thoughts: It's best to go into this book totally blind. I am urging my audience to not read reviews or articles or even the back of the book. All you truly need to know is that this book allows you, the reader, to walk right inside this married couple's house, take a seat on their couch, and watch their marriage implode. I marveled at how authentic the characters are and how frighteningly realistic the situation is—this could happen to anyone—but it's the tension and the escalation and the outcome that make this story impossible to walk away from. Don't bring your bookmark; you won't need it.

MOTHERTHING

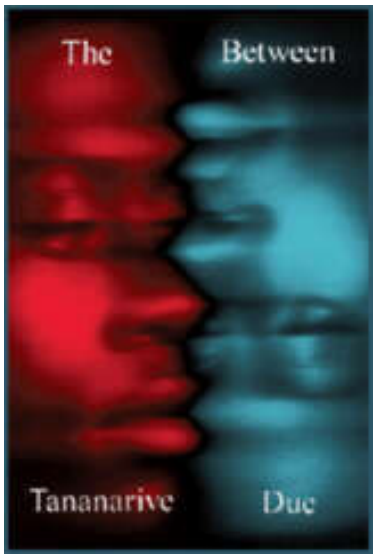
Ainslie Hogarth
VINTAGE | 2022 | 288 PAGES

Abby and Ralph feel lucky they escaped their difficult childhoods and found security in one another. But their marital bliss is interrupted when Ralph's mother, Laura, is unable to care for herself and Ralph rushes to her rescue. The situation seems utterly unbearable until things take a sharp turn; instead of Laura driving a wedge between them with her domineering physical presence, she opts for a paranormal one instead.

My Thoughts: This book is an intimate look at the relationships between three people: a husband, a wife, and his mother. Both Abby, the wife, and Laura, the mother, appear to be competing for the affections of Ralph, making him choose which relationship is the most important to him: mother or wife. It's honestly so disturbing and relatable, it hit so close to home. Hogarth's wheelhouse is her sense of humor, which is such a relief. Without the constant laughs, I'm not sure I could have survived this one. Watching the main character sacrifice her own mental health and dignity at the feet of this woman who seems hell-bent on destroying her marriage for the sake of her own sense of security and importance was difficult to

experience. But it was also cathartic to feel seen. To feel connected to other women out there who have shared in similar struggles and to process complicated emotions and situations safely through reading horror. I sincerely thank Ainslie Hogarth for this one.

The Between



Tananarive Due (1995)
HARPER PERENNIAL | 2021 | 304 PAGES

The Between *is about a man, Hilton, who is left with the ability to see strong visions after his brush with death as a child. He almost drowns in an undertow during a family get-together, but his Nana saves him. Decades later, Hilton is successful and married to an ambitious woman who just got elected to be a local judge, which launches her and their family into the public eye. Someone starts stalking them and Hilton's visions become darker and more frequent.*

My Thoughts: It's tough to believe this is a debut novel. When I think of a debut, I think there is time for an author to hone their craft and truly come into their own unique storytelling voice.

Tananarive Due drops *The Between* as a flawless, pitch-perfect psychological horror novel on the first go-around. My favorite aspect is the intricately detailed relationship between Hilton and his wife, Dede. They seem so authentic. The way they face heavy trials like racism, hate, and physical threats together as a unit, but also as individuals with their own personalities, is truly so insightful and talented on Due's part. It leads readers to chew on the themes of the story with a balanced perspective and ask, "What would I do in this situation? Who do I side with? Hilton or Dede?" I loved my time in this book with this couple.

Sign Here

Claudia Lux
BERKLEY | 2022 | 416 PAGES

This book has two storylines going at the same time. One story involves ex-humans that now work in Hell. Their job is to recognize people on Earth who would be willing to sign away their eternal souls to have a temporal exchange; typically, it's to save someone's life or bring someone back from the dead. If they get enough souls, they're promoted; however,

if they are able to exchange all the souls of a certain marked family or group of people, they get another shot at life on Earth. There are a lot of rules.

The other storyline involves a domestic drama surrounding a family in a small town. The husband and wife have been together since high school and have two teenage children now. The husband, Silas, has a complicated past. His brother was found guilty of murdering his girlfriend at their vacation house and then he took his own life in prison. Silas and his wife have an unstable marriage but still decide to go on their annual family trip to the vacation house (the scene of the decades-old crime). The junior-high-aged daughter brings her new best friend. Lily, Silas's wife, is having an affair.

My Thoughts: The drama of this family, specifically centered on the married couple, is everything. The way I was absorbed into this book for hours on end just living my best blissed-out reader's life was goals. I had no idea *Sign Here* was going to be so immersive or have this whole *The Real Housewives*-style popcorn drama at its core. The supernatural element is fun too, don't get me wrong, but it's the way this author prioritizes the juicy drama, secrets, and lies that had me thoroughly invested. Do not miss this if you at all seek out reality TV to zone out or find comfort during times of stress or anxiety. This book was a great distraction.

A Guest in the House

E. M. Carroll (they/them)
FIRST SECOND | 2023 | 256 PAGES (GRAPHIC NOVEL)

In this beautifully illustrated graphic novel, a young woman marries a recently widowed man with a daughter. As she tries desperately to assimilate herself in this new relationship, new house, and new life, she realizes her husband's dead wife, Sheila, is more of a presence than she counted on.

My Thoughts: I can't say I understand everything that happens in this story perfectly, but I can say I'm certain E. M. Carroll's artwork and atmospheric storytelling will surround readers like a warm blanket—entirely enveloping, arresting, and captivating. I read this book in one sitting and then I went back like a week later and read it again, picking up a little more of the breadcrumbs and clues and leaving with a better grasp on the message than last time. I think I get it, but I like that some of it is still a little ambiguous. Props to Carroll for the positive representation of stepparents. I think horror is imbalanced when it comes to our collective perception of the "new mom" or "new dad."

I Can Fix Her

Rae Wilde
CLASH BOOKS | 2025 | 104 PAGES

Johnny runs into her old flame Alice at a local café. Even though the wounds they inflicted on each other during their relationship are still healing, Johnny can't help accepting the invite back to Alice's apartment. In the morning, in the stark light of their hasty decisions, they question whether they can evolve as a couple or if they are inclined to always stay the same. Everything around them is changing and nothing about their reality can be trusted, especially each other.

My Thoughts: We all know about second chances in the context of a romantic relationship. Someone makes a mistake, asks for forgiveness, and then the couple moves forward to make lasting changes. But what if the couple gets trapped in a hellish time loop, forcing them to reframe the boundaries of their relationship day after day? With a dazzling blend of science fiction, dark romance, and speculative horror, Rae Wilde captured me within the confines of this intimate love affair—the experience is like being suspended in time under the glass of a snow globe with the chaos and energy of the lovers spinning all around you in a flurry of emotions. Once things calm down, someone shakes it all up again. Both women have their flaws. The title, *I Can Fix Her,* blazed in my mind like a

neon sign, just like the book cover … I just kept reflecting on that title and the multiple meanings it has once you complete this fever dream. I'm excited about the way it suits this reading list so perfectly and more excited about the way Rae Wilde's star shines in this genre.

JUST LIKE OTHER GIRLS

By Rae Wilde

I've seen women in movies scream out their pain to empty fields and off a cliff's edge and into the fluff of a pillow. How alluring! How luxurious to rage. Seduced by the thought, considering it, I have looked around in an empty wood, wondering if I was truly alone, wondering if I too could untether the violence inside me, let it rip through my throat and ricochet through oak and pine and cypress. I think I might feel better if I did, but I always stop the scream, afraid someone might hear, afraid someone might call someone else, afraid of disapproval, and afraid I'm not entitled to the indulgence.

Afraid.

Afraid, afraid, afraid, and angry—isn't that the chronic affliction of my life? What happens to a rage deferred? I don't think I'm the only one who's been infected by this—anger without permission to express it. I have a thought—more of a theory, really—that it's inherited. Generations of women connected by a rage so deep and so long unacknowledged, it alters the chemistry, remembered by the muscles and activated by a familiar environment. You must feel it, this clawing, cloying undercurrent of dissatisfaction. Beneath a play-it-cool, smiley, supplicant veneer, an itch, that if scratched, if the scab over top was ripped off, might gush or hemorrhage or explode.

Amy Dunne's "Cool Girl" monologue (*Gone Girl,* Gillian Flynn) imprinted on me over a decade ago. I'm not unique in loving the book. It's mentioned on most thriller lists, lists of great plot twists, lists of unlikable female characters. Guess that means I can't say *I'm not like other girls,* but regardless, I'll take it a step further. I don't just love the book, I love Amy. She describes the experience of

living as an empty vessel for a man to pour his image into, of suffering for his pleasure, be it mentally, physically, emotionally, or all three, and how this loss of self is not only acceptable to her male partners, but the ideal. I've felt that. I've known those men and tried to make them happy.

Surely at this point, at least one male reader wishes this book had a comments section. *NOT ALL MEN!* I hear him cry. Right. Your dissent is noted for the record. Back to Amy.

Amy Dunne is not considered by many to be unlikable because she notices this pattern, and certainly not because she is willing to play the cool girl to win a husband. No, Amy is unlikable because she kept score. She expected her sacrifices to be repaid, and when they weren't, she made Nick, her husband, pay. Using all the archetypes that have, for ages, kept women in neat boxes and roles, using her intellect and cunning and the presuppositions of patriarchal men, Amy won—and the victory was as absolute as it was bloody.

There is catharsis in Amy's triumph and the stories of others like her, women who do not apologize or play it cool or keep sweet. I want women who get even. Exact revenge! Seize power! Scream, and not into an empty wood, but into the face of the one who wronged you! Because it's not safe to express rage this way in the real world (and the pesky annoyance of living with a moral compass), those female characters are the balm to my deep wound, so those are the female characters I read and watch and write.

While I acknowledge the subtle denigration of using the term *girl* instead of *woman*, I will stick with the word to draw a more lucid conclusion here. I am disinterested in being *not like other girls*, and equally disinterested in being the *cool girl*. I love girls, in all their variation and fullness. I love girls who love makeup and girls who don't wear it. I love girls who work in trades and girls who bake vegan cupcakes. Girls who made varsity soccer, daddy's girls, girl's girls, girls who aren't quite sure what kind of girl they are yet. I love

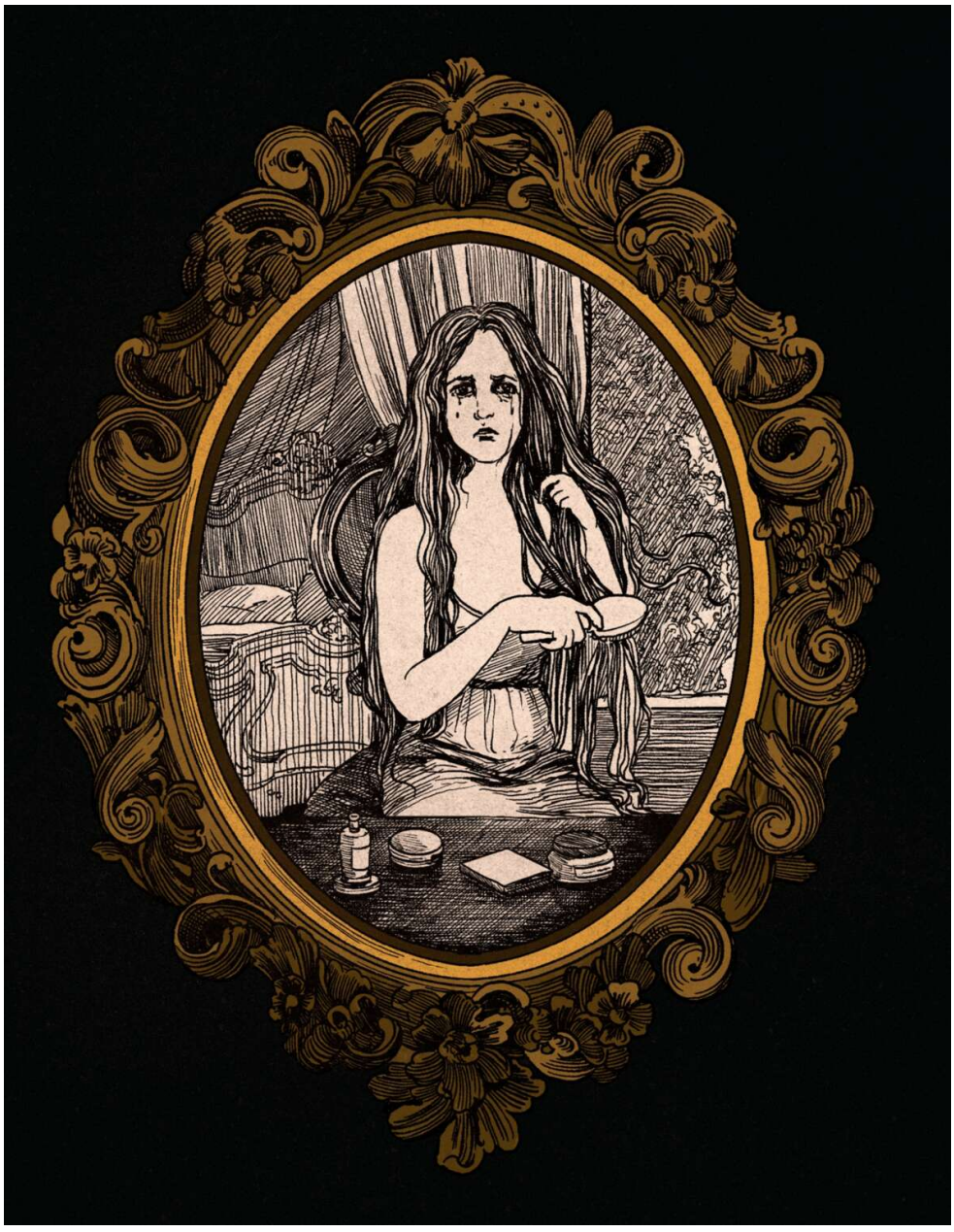
drunk girls in bar bathrooms who offer me mascara and tampons, and church girls buying plants at the nursery after Sunday service. I love girls who warn me about the guy everyone likes who's kind of weird in private and girls who, when I warn them, don't ask for proof. Girls who say, *thanks for telling me.* Girls have answered my call in the middle of the night, have walked me to my car, have speculated with me over lunch and done FBI-level searches on my behalf, have said *as you should* when we both knew I was wrong. Why would I strive to be empty? Why would I strive to be less like other girls, when I love girls?

And because I love girls, I want to tell them I am just like them. I too want to scream. I want to rage. I want to be a hurricane force, and I have dreams, big, painful dreams, and I hurt, and I have been quiet, and I see you.

So, I write about angry women. Selfish women. Violent, loud, sexual women. I write about the feminine will to power because claiming that space in a fictional world will not solve the problems the patriarchy has put upon us, but it is a vision. Exploring feminine rage in fiction will not cure the injury inside me, inside us, but it does soothe the ache. It does say to the girls who are so much like me and who I am so much like: *You are not alone. I am angry too.*

Rae Wilde is the author of *I Do Not Apologize for My Position on Men* and *I Can Fix Her.* She has published numerous books and short stories under the name Rae Knowles and is represented by Laura Williams at Greene & Heaton.

Skin Deep: The Ugly Side of Beauty

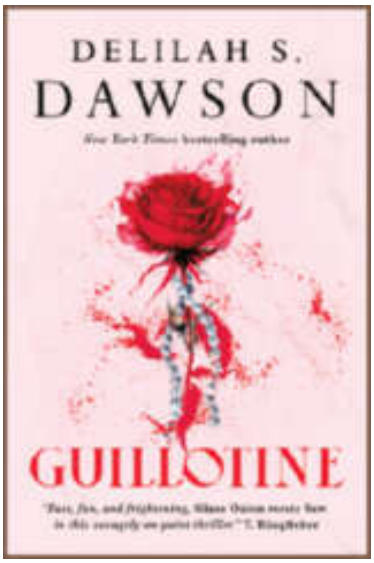


The books on this list run the gamut of emotions and vibes but they all explore common themes of toxicity in the culture of beauty and wellness. Some poke fun at industry standards and expectations

while others imagine what would happen if socially accepted boundaries were crossed into more dangerous practices. We hear horror stories related to social media and body image every day. Women speak out endlessly about the pressures of staying thin or young or beautiful. Some influencers are even trying to sell fast microtrends. Urging consumers to run to their shop and buy the latest microtrend that will expire in like 24 hours. Garbage clothes. Fake accessories. Just scammy, nasty trash for your face, your body, your lifestyle and all it costs is your SOUL. Vanity will always cost more than you want to spend and force you down a path you didn't want to travel down. These books read all together as the curation intends, or even separately, will satisfy your natural aversion to the unhealthy preoccupation humanity has with beauty.

Book Vibrations: *ambition, beauty & wellness culture, body horror, business, consequences, corporations, disturbing, "eat the rich," fashion, industry standards, influencers, products, social media, the ugly side of humanity, wealthy people*

Guillotine

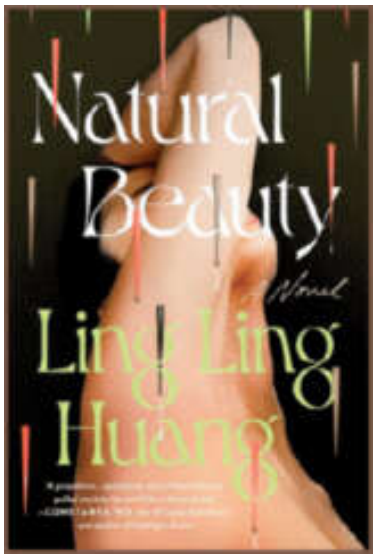


Delilah S. Dawson
TITAN BOOKS | 2024 | 208 PAGES

Dez Lane will do anything to skirt around obstacles so she can rise to the top of the fashion industry faster. She will even date the son of the editor-in-chief of a high-profile fashion magazine. The guy is barely tolerable and seems to only have one thing on his mind. Dez knows if she gives it up too easily, her chances of meeting his mother will pass her by. She somehow charms her way into an invite to the family's private island estate for a holiday. After signing an NDA, things start to get weird.

My Thoughts: If ever there was an entertaining story begging to be your next audiobook for your gym workouts or 10K walking sprints, this is the one. It's short and sassy, stabby and splattery. I must have looked like a maniac, walking in public with a big grin on my face while I listened to Dez Lane take advantage of a dim-witted, handsome, wealthy, sexist pig so that she could get ahead in life. As soon as things go sideways on the island, the stakes are raised and everything is splashed in female rage and spoiled rich people's guts. The feminist, political, and social commentary pairs nicely with the author's ability to write scathing satire with colorful cultural commentary.

Natural Beauty



Ling Ling Huang
DUTTON | 2023 | 272 PAGES

A young woman takes a job at an upscale beauty and wellness company to help pay for her parents' assisted living costs and healthcare. The more she becomes integrated into the culture at Holistik, the more she realizes how insidiously consuming it will be for her in the long run. The money is great, but she might lose herself in the process.

My Thoughts: I was not expecting the full weight of horror this book offers. I listened to the audiobook, so I took my time with the narrative, soaking up every word. The way the author slowly and meticulously builds up the tension and layers in new elements to the story to elevate the stakes is a skill not commonly found in a debut novel. I was shocked by the descriptions of body horror and the lengths the main character was willing to go for her parents. So unexpected, so disturbing, and yet, deliciously hilarious too—if I wasn't shocked and horrified, I was laughing. Such an amazing debut and a solid story exposing social conformity, the ills of

maintaining a youthful appearance, and the casually cruel ethics of the beauty and wellness culture.

MEWING

Chloe Spencer
SHORTWAVE MEDIA | 2024 | 140 PAGES

The Bleach Babes is a social media influencer co-op located in LA. Vixen is surprised when the leader, Margo, agrees to mentor her and help her rise to the top. The two women become intimate, and Vix understands what this line of work will ultimately cost her.

My Thoughts: This book is short and seductive. Once I started reading, I knew I would finish in one sitting. I love when horror and social media come together—some of my favorite *Black Mirror* episodes explore the same tropes—and reveal a glimpse behind the account of social media stars and the secret lifestyles of all those fake, curated personas. Who are these women who influence and what really motivates them? It was so fun to read this book and find out.

Fashion Trends, Deadly Ends

Brianna Malotke
GREEN AVENUE BOOKS & PUBLISHING | 2023 | 162 PAGES

Brianna Malotke writes poetry detailing some of history's most dangerous beauty trends—from rib removal and poisonous dyes to sewn eyelashes, she reveals the ugly cost of staying "beautiful."

My Thoughts: I know Brianna through my involvement with the Seattle chapter of the Horror Writers Association. I saw this book at one of our events and knew I had to read it. I could not believe my eyes. I had no idea that fashion and beauty were so deadly! I knew that fainting couches were an invention born out of necessity because women's corsets were so tight to achieve that "snatched waist" look (which has made an unwelcomed come-back, Ladies); they had difficulty breathing and would need a place to literally faint. But I didn't know about the origins of fake eyelashes, harmful chemicals, and even poisons in direct contact with skin, and just a

slew of ignorant ideas all in the name of beauty. Such a fun way to learn new things.

Patrica Wants to Cuddle

Samantha Allen
ZANDO | 2022 | 256 PAGES

The contestants of a reality romance show are whisked off to a not-so-ideal private island somewhere in the Pacific Northwest. As the dynamic between the women grows increasingly more competitive and hostile, they become less aware of the danger that surrounds them in this new setting. Ultimately, they will learn they should care less about getting the attention of the available bachelor and be more concerned with their own survival.

My Thoughts: I listened to the audiobook on hoopla, and it might be my favorite audiobook experience. If you have ever watched a season of the wildly popular TV show, *The Bachelor,* or even know anything about the format of the show, you are the perfect reader for this book. It is hysterical! The full cast of characters is narrated

by different people, so it has a very cinematic quality. Once everyone finds out that they are not alone on this island and people start turning up dead, the storyline escalates to a fever pitch and becomes even more entertaining. I loved the drama, the juicy scandals, and the gruesome violence. More fun than frightening, it's a good time and I felt good afterward too. The ending is my favorite part.

GROTESQUE

Natsuo Kirino (2003) translated by Rebecca Copeland
KNOPF | 2007 | 480 PAGES

While this book is not traditionally considered horror and lands squarely in the crime thriller genre, it's on this list because it explores the domineering and disturbing societal dysfunction that breeds femicide. Set in modern-day Japan, Grotesque *is the story of two women who are murdered after they become sex workers—the sister and former classmate of the unnamed protagonist narrating the story. The mystery surrounding their deaths is examined through multiple perspectives.*

My Thoughts: The most disturbing aspect of this book is the way the author allows her female characters to express their innermost ugly thoughts with the reader. At first, I had specific feelings toward beauty standards and the way societal norms influence and victimize women: attacking our mental health and our perception of how we are perceived and even how we view ourselves. But as the story continues to shed its skin, what lies underneath is more sinister that I initially thought. Of course, I will leave this up to you to discover on your own. The true horror of *Grotesque* isn't what you expect.

Transformations

I find it fascinating and frustrating that we have these bodies we exist in that are essentially a mystery to us. Sure, there are people who study our bodies and minds, and we see these medical professionals when something feels out of sorts but sometimes, what's happening inside us escapes diagnosis. I tell people all the

time that I wish we had access to a machine we could plug ourselves into at the end of the day that could run a diagnostic on our full body and then print out a sheet of paper that could tell us exactly what's going on in there. It would detect all our deficiencies, surpluses, low-functioning organs, or systems working too hard and then we could make the necessary adjustments by taking the proper supplements. The way it is, we're just guessing. And we could be doing further damage to our bodies out of total ignorance, and nobody knows—not until there are serious symptoms to alert us and by that time, the damage is done. The stories included in this reading list are all about transformations—body horror at its best, the female form going through a major change due to a psychological or physical phenomena. I'm so thankful that authors explore real life fears about our maturing, transforming bodies through the lens of horror. Readers can wrestle with their own hidden emotions and anxieties as they activate their empathy for fictional characters going through something terrifying.

Book Vibrations: *autonomy, body horror, female friendships, feminism, longing for change, mental health, queer, repressed sexual energy, romance, unseen forces, women's roles in society*

Chlorine

Jade Song (any pronouns)
WILLIAM MORROW | 2023 | 256 PAGES

Told from the perspective of a child coming of age, Chlorine *absorbs readers into her obsession with competitive swimming, struggles with her changing body, and confusing feelings for her new best friend.*

My Thoughts: I enjoyed the audiobook version so much that I looked forward to doing household chores just so I could put my headphones in and listen to what was going to happen next. The most exciting thing about this book is how it transcends any kind of classification. It's both young adult and adult. It's both literary and coming-of-age body horror. Coupled with an intimate, authentic portrait of a young girl transitioning into adulthood is the magical realism elements of transformation. When the narrator shares stories about her swimming coach from her perspective, the reader can appreciate the child's point of view, as well as look at what's happening through the lens of our adult experience. I love how the author layers in that juxtaposition. Such a unique book that cannot be missed.

Queen of Teeth

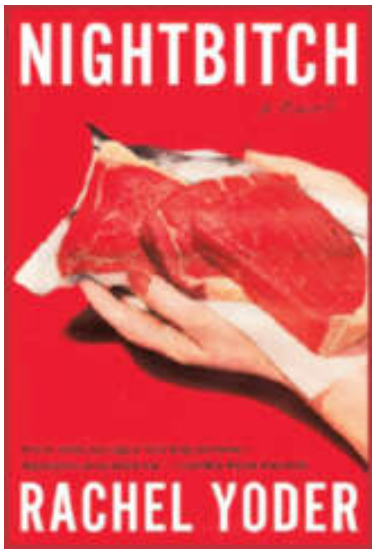
Hailey Piper
STRANGEHOUSE BOOKS | 2021 | 198 PAGES

In Queen of Teeth, *Hailey Piper's stunning debut novel—and still one of my favorites—Yolanda "Yaya" Betancourt discovers unsettling and unprecedented changes in her body, a grotesque side effect of a lifelong medical experiment. As she comes to grips with her transformation, the powerful AlphaBeta Pharmaceutical Corporation begins hunting her down. Amid this chaos, Yaya navigates her evolving condition, fights for autonomy, and finds herself falling in love. Combining body horror, romance, and sharp commentary,* Queen of Teeth *redefines what modern horror can be.*

My Thoughts: Piper's talent for storytelling shines brightly here, setting a new bar for body horror. From the very first page, the novel grabs hold with its strange world and refuses to let go. Yaya's journey is equal parts grotesque and empowering, tackling themes of bodily autonomy and agency with unflinching honesty. Women are often conditioned to stay silent about their struggles, particularly when it comes to our health. Piper shatters this silence

with a narrative that demands we confront the systems that seek to control and define us. Through an unapologetically queer lens, the book creates space for voices often sidelined in horror. This is a celebration of all the strange, bold, and beautiful things horror can be.

NIGHTBITCH



Rachel Yoder
DOUBLEDAY | 2021 | 256 PAGES

An artist is home alone with her toddler day in and day out while her husband travels for work. Struggling with a mixed bag of emotions, the unnamed narrator begins transforming into the Nightbitch, her wild and feral canine alter ego who gets to experience unrestrained playtime with her toddler and terrorizes the neighborhood at night.

My Thoughts: As a mother of three who had her first child at twenty years old and didn't go off to college or ever live on my own, I found *Nightbitch* to be the most relatable piece of fiction I've ever read. Which was surprisingly terrifying. I didn't necessarily want to

examine repressed feelings so closely—this book is like an actual mirror. Rachel Yoder leaves it all on the page with an unflinching, vulnerable rawness. Sometimes the main character's thoughts were so real the words felt like barbs that penetrated past the page and sunk into the very meat of my deepest regrets and desires. Darkly funny (hysterical even), painfully accurate, and supremely poignant, this book manages to capture a slice of life from the female experience that so many women will be able to see themselves in, so be prepared!

Mosaic

Catherine McCarthy
DARK MATTER INK | 2023 | 164 PAGES

A stained-glass artist is asked to restore an old church window back to its original glory. She gathers up all the glass shards she can find scattered all over the property. As she puts the pieces together, she's confused by the depiction of something highly unexpected in the mosaic's artwork—an unknown deity.

My Thoughts: Perfectly paced and expertly crafted, Catherine McCarthy's story builds up mystery and suspense to a fever pitch. The setting is so richly descriptive that I could visualize everything in cinematic detail. A thick coat of Gothic atmosphere establishes a dark, insidious mood. All I wanted was to read this in front of a roaring fire on a bleak, dreary, rainy day with a hot mug of tea and cozy blanket. The slowly creeping dread finally comes to its shocking conclusion that gave me classic *Rosemary's Baby* vibes—you'll see what I mean. My recommendation is to read this in one sitting.

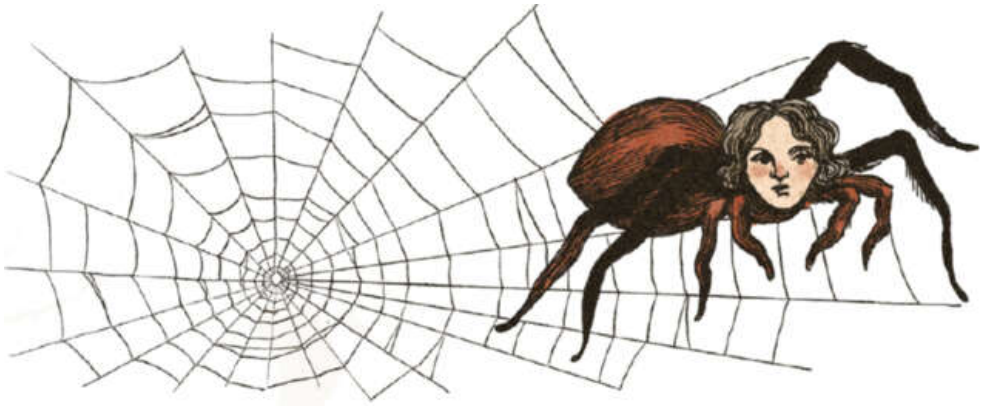
The Secret Skin

Wendy N. Wagner (she/they)
NEON HEMLOCK PRESS | 2021 | 102 PAGES

June Vogel returns to her family's estate on the Oregon Coast after being away for six years. We begin with a sweeping tour of the grounds, including the Vogel family sawmill and surrounding forest, as June's new relationship with her niece, Abigail (a creepy child) deepens. June's

brother Frederick and his new wife come to Storm Break and the dynamic between all the characters transforms—more secrets, new feelings surfacing, and the possibility for danger.

My Thoughts: In the tradition of all atmospheric, Gothic storytelling, the author sets the stage perfectly in the prologue, hinting at family tragedy and secrets that will be revealed in time. But with only one hundred pages used to tell the tale, readers don't have to wait long. The prose is lush and inviting. I especially enjoyed the Pacific Northwest setting with the moody gray skies and wet drippy landscape. An inescapable feeling of longing and desire lingers well after turning the last page. I loved the addition of all the supernatural elements and the sparkling magic and unpredictability of *The Secret Skin.* My favorite part was discovering the reason for the intriguing title of this book.



Book Checklist

Twisted Haunted Houses

☐ *The September House* by Carissa Orlando
☐ *I Remember* You by Yrsa Sigurðardóttir; translated by Philip Roughton
☐ *Tell Me I'm Worthless* by Alison Rumfitt
☐ *Wylding Hall* by Elizabeth Hand
☐ *The Hotel* by Daisy Johnson
☐ *Just Like Home* by Sarah Gailey
☐ *Linghun* by Ai Jiang
☐ *The House Next Door* by Anne Rivers Siddons

I See Dead People

☐ *Shutter* by Ramona Emerson
☐ *The Folly* by Gemma Amor
☐ *This Cursed House* by Del Sandeen
☐ *The Reformatory* by Tananarive Due
☐ *The Haunting of Velkwood* by Gwendolyn Kiste
☐ *Eartheater by* Dolores Reyes; translated by Julia Sanches
☐ *Wilted Lilies (Duology)* by Kelli Owen
☐ *Himself* by Jess Kidd

Bloodthirsty

☐ *The Gilda Stories* by Jewelle Gomez
☐ *A Dowry of Blood* by S. T. Gibson
☐ *Vivia* by Tanith Lee

☐ *Carmilla: The First Vampire* by Amy Choo; illustrated by Soo Lee
☐ *A Long Time Dead* by Samara Breger
☐ *House of Hunger* by Alexis Henderson

Unhappily Ever After: Dark Folklore, Fantasy, and Fairy Tales

☐ *Comfort Me with Apples* by Catherynne M. Valente
☐ *The Salt Grows Heavy* by Cassandra Khaw
☐ *When I Sing, Mountains Dance* by Irene Solà; translated by Mara Faye Lethem
☐ *Halloween Fiend* by C. V. Hunt
☐ *Lapvona* by Ottessa Moshfegh
☐ *Through the Woods* by Emily Carroll
☐ *The Butcher of the Forest* by Premee Mohamed
☐ *Pretty Little Dead Girls* by Mercedes M. Yardley
☐ *The Lover* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia

Don’t Go in the Woods

☐ *Jackal* by Erin E. Adams
☐ *The Devil Crept In* by Ania Ahlborn
☐ *Hunted* by Darcy Coates
☐ *The Ghost Woods* by C. J. Cooke
☐ *Small Angels* by Lauren Owen
☐ *Horseman: A Tale of Sleepy Hollow* by Christina Henry

Documentaries, Cursed Films, and Found Footage

☐ *Final Girl Theory* by A. C. Wise
☐ *The Lost Village* by Camilla Sten; translated by Alexandra Fleming
☐ *Mister Magic* by Kiersten White
☐ *Silver Nitrate* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia
☐ *Experimental Film* by Gemma Files
☐ *Plain Bad Heroines* by Emily M. Danforth

☐ *Night Film* by Marisha Pessl

Women vs. The Cult

☐ *Gather the Daughters* by Jennie Melamed
☐ *Lute* by Jennifer Thorne
☐ *The Year of the Witching* by Alexis Henderson
☐ *Conjuring the Witch* by Jessica Leonard
☐ *Madam* by Phoebe Wynne

Gothic Secret Societies

☐ *Little Eve* by Catriona Ward
☐ *The Death of Jane Lawrence* by Caitlin Starling
☐ *Creatures of Will and Temper* by Molly Tanzer
☐ *Our Share of Night* by Mariana Enríquez; translated by Megan McDowell
☐ *A Theory of Haunting* by Sarah Monette

An Escape to a Beautiful Estate with Unexpected Darkness

☐ *Diavola* by Jennifer Thorne
☐ *The Ancestor* by Danielle Trussoni
☐ *The Resting Place* by Camilla Sten; translated by Alexandra Fleming
☐ *The Woman in the Mirror* by Rebecca James
☐ *It Will Only Hurt for a Moment* by Delilah S. Dawson

Gótico Familia

☐ *Mexican Gothic* by Silvia Moreno-Garcia
☐ *The Hacienda* by Isabel Cañas
☐ *Woodworm* by Layla Martínez; translated by Sophie Hughes and Annie McDermott
☐ *Before the Devil Knows You're Here* by Autumn Krause

The Tropiest Gothic Horror Trope Ever

☐ *The Whistling* by Rebecca Netley
☐ *The Daughters of Block Island* by Christa Carmen
☐ *The Secrets of Hartwood Hall* by Katie Lumsden
☐ *Grey Dog* by Elliott Gish
☐ *King Nyx* by Kirsten Bakis
☐ *Rebecca* by Daphne du Maurier

If These Walls Could Talk

☐ *A Good House for Children* by Kate Collins
☐ *The Yellow Wallpaper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman
☐ *A Mouthful of Air* by Amy Koppelman
☐ *The Devil and Mrs. Davenport* by Paulette Kennedy
☐ *Sanctuary* by Valentina Cano Repetto
☐ *Ghost Mother* by Kelly Dwyer
☐ *The Wildling Sisters* by Eve Chase
☐ *The Silent Companions* by Laura Purcell

Horrormance

☐ *Vampires of El Norte* by Isabel Cañas
☐ *Providence* by Caroline Kepnes
☐ *The Haunting of Maddy Clare* by Simone St. James
☐ *Such Sharp Teeth* by Rachel Harrison

Horromantasy

☐ *The Path of Thorns* by A. G. Slatter
☐ *The Six Deaths of the Saint* by Alix E. Harrow
☐ *Fyneshade* by Kate Griffin
☐ *Midnight Rooms* by Donyae Coles
☐ *Starling House* by Alix E. Harrow
☐ *Salt & Broom* by Sharon Lynn Fisher

Cottage Spells & Family Sagas

☐ *A Secret History of Witches* by Louisa Morgan
☐ *The Witches of New York* by Ami McKay
☐ *The Briar Book of the Dead* by A. G. Slatter
☐ *Practical Magic* by Alice Hoffman
☐ *Weyward* by Emilia Hart
☐ *Lolly Willowes* by Silvia Townsend Warner

50 States, 50 Books by Women

☐ Alabama: *Chapelwood* by Cherie Priest
☐ Alaska: *The Gathering* by C. J. Tudor
☐ Arizona: *Night's Edge/First Light* by Liz Kerin
☐ Arkansas: *The Bird Eater* by Ania Ahlborn
☐ California: *Maeve Fly* by CJ Leede
☐ Colorado: *White Horse* by Erika T. Wurth
☐ Connecticut: *Chills* by Mary SanGiovanni
☐ Delaware: *Sunburn* by Laura Lippman
☐ Florida: *Cirque Berserk* by Jessica Guess
☐ Georgia: *The Weight of Blood* by Tiffany D. Jackson
☐ Hawaii: *Hokuloa Road* by Elizabeth Hand
☐ Idaho: *Beulah* by Christi Nogle
☐ Illinois: *The Shoemaker's Magician* by Cynthia Pelayo
☐ Indiana: *Take Your Turn, Teddy* by Haley Newlin
☐ Iowa: *The Lamb Will Slaughter the Lion* by Margaret Killjoy
☐ Kansas: *Red Station* by Kenzie Jennings
☐ Kentucky: *Starling House* by Alix E. Harrow
☐ Louisiana: *Such A Pretty Smile* by Kristi DeMeester
☐ Maine: *Looking Glass Sound* by Catriona Ward
☐ Maryland: *Wait Till Helen Comes: The Graphic Novel* by Mary Downing Hahn, adapted by Scott Peterson, illustrated by Meredith Laxton and Russ Badget
☐ Massachusetts: *Eileen* by Ottessa Moshfegh

☐ Michigan: *Lakewood* by Megan Giddings
☐ Minnesota: *A Hawk in the Woods* by Carrie Laben
☐ Mississippi: *The Past is Never* by Tiffany Quay Tyson
☐ Missouri: *Gone Girl, Sharp Objects,* and *Dark Places* by Gillian Flynn
☐ Montana: *Cryer's Cross* by Lisa McMann
☐ Nebraska: *The Farm* by Joanne Ramos
☐ Nevada: *Desert Creatures* by Kay Chronister
☐ New Hampshire: *Sign Here* by Claudia Lux
☐ New Jersey: *Black Sheep* by Rachel Harrison
☐ New Mexico: *What Hides in the Cupboards* by Cassondra Windwalker
☐ New York: *Severance* by Ling Ma
☐ North Carolina: *A House with Good Bones* by T. Kingfisher
☐ North Dakota: *Frost Bite* by Angela Sylvaine
☐ Ohio: *Betty* by Tiffany McDaniel
☐ Oklahoma: *Man Made Monsters* by Andrea L. Rogers
☐ Oregon: *Girl in the Creek* by Wendy Wagner
☐ Pennsylvania: *The Low, Low Woods* by Carmen Maria Machado
☐ Rhode Island: *The Drowning Girl* by Caitlín Kiernan
☐ South Carolina: *Bastard Out of Carolina* by Dorothy Allison
☐ South Dakota: *Tinfoil Butterfly* by Rachel Eve Moulton
☐ Tennessee: *Whispers in the Dark* by Laurel Hightower
☐ Texas: *Bless Your Heart* by Lindy Ryan
☐ Utah: *Peachy* by Camri Kohler
☐ Vermont: *Hangsaman* by Shirley Jackson
☐ Virginia: *Theme Music* by T. Marie Vandelly
☐ Washington: *The Good House* by Tananarive Due
☐ West Virginia: *Brother* by Ania Ahlborn
☐ Wisconsin: *The Grip of It* by Jac Jemc
☐ Wyoming: *Dead of Winter* by Darcy Coates

Women of Splatterpunk

☐ *Maeve Fly* by CJ Leede
☐ *Red Station* by Kenzie Jennings
☐ *Manhunt* by Gretchen Felker-Martin
☐ *Go Down Hard* by Ali Seay
☐ *Bonding* by Maggie Siebert
☐ *True Crime* by Samantha Kolesnik
☐ *Dawn of the Living Impaired and Other Messed-Up Zombie Stories* by Christine Morgan
☐ *Murder House* by C. V. Hunt

What Women Say About Femicide in Latin America Through Horror Fiction

☐ *Cockfight* by María Fernanda Ampuero; translated by Frances Riddle
☐ *Human Sacrifices* by María Fernanda Ampuero; translated by Frances Riddle
☐ *Hurricane Season* by Fernanda Melchor; translated by Sophie Hughes
☐ *Reservoir Bitches* by Dahlia de la Cerda; translated by Heather Cleary and Julia Sanches
☐ *Dead Girls* by Selva Almada; translated by Annie McDermott
☐ *Vista Chinesa* by Tatiana Salem Levy; translated by Alison Entrekin

Eat Your Vegetables

☐ *Of Cattle and Men* by Ana Paula Maia; translated by Zoë Perry
☐ *Tenderloin* by Joy Sorman; translated by Lara Vergnaud
☐ *Tender is the Flesh* by Agustina Bazterrica; translated by Sarah Moses
☐ *The Vegetarian* by Han Kang; translated by Deborah Smith
☐ *Bloom* by Delilah S. Dawson
☐ *To Be Devoured* by Sara Tantlinger

On the Farm

☐ *Foxash* by Kate Worsley
☐ *Residents of Honeysuckle Cottage* by Elizabeth Davidson
☐ *Ghost Wall* by Sarah Moss
☐ *The Auctioneer* by Joan Samson
☐ *The Little Stranger* by Sarah Waters

Swampcore & Sporror

☐ *Green Fuse Burning* by Tiffany Morris
☐ *Wakenhyrst* by Michelle Paver
☐ *The Woman in Black* by Susan Hill
☐ *What Moves the Dead* by T. Kingfisher
☐ *Rootwork* by Tracy Cross
☐ *The Bog Wife* by Kay Chronister
☐ *Fruiting Bodies* by Ashley Robin Franklin
☐ *The Spore Queen* by Debra Castaneda
☐ *You Will Speak for the Dead* by R. A. Busby

Not Your Dad's Westerns

☐ *Vermilion: The Adventures of Lou Merriweather, Psychopomp* by Molly Tanzer
☐ *The Bullet Swallower* by Elizabeth Gonzalez James
☐ *Devil's Call* by J. Danielle Dorn
☐ *When the Night Bells Ring* by Jo Kaplan
☐ *Desert Creatures* by Kay Chronister

Exposing Historical Erasure

☐ *Beloved* by Toni Morrison
☐ *Kindred* by Octavia Butler
☐ *When the Reckoning Comes* by LaTanya McQueen
☐ *Five Little Indians* by Michelle Good

☐ *The Fervor* by Alma Katsu

Psychic Trauma

☐ *She is a Haunting* by Trang Thanh Tran
☐ *An Ordinary Violence* by Adriana Chartrand
☐ *Bad Cree* by Jessica Johns
☐ *Graveyard of Lost Children* by Katrina Monroe
☐ *The Madness* by Dawn Kurtagich
☐ *The Children on the Hill* by Jennifer McMahon

Survive Your Living Nightmares

☐ *The Hollow Places* by T. Kingfisher
☐ *Dark Matter* by Michelle Paver
☐ *This Wretched Valley* by Jenny Kiefer
☐ *Blizzard* by Marie Vingtras; translated by Jeffery Zuckerman
☐ *The Wolf Road* by Beth Lewis

Save Yourself from Hell

☐ *Into the Drowning Deep* by Mira Grant
☐ *A Haunting in the Arctic* by C. J. Cooke
☐ *Where the Dead Wait* by Ally Wilkes
☐ *Dead Silence* by S. A. Barnes

Echoes of Frankenstein

☐ *Mary's Monster: Love, Madness, and How Mary Shelley Created Frankenstein* by Lita Judge
☐ *Our Hideous Progeny* by C. E. McGill
☐ *A Complex Accident of Life* by Jessica McHugh
☐ *The Dark Descent of Elizabeth Frankenstein* by Kiersten White

Ladies of October: Vintage Horror

☐ *Spunk* by Zora Neale Hurston
☐ *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson
☐ *Interview with the Vampire* by Anne Rice
☐ *Death in Spring* by Mercè Rodoreda; translated by Martha Tennent
☐ *The Missing* by Sarah Langan
☐ *When Darkness Loves Us* by Elizabeth Engstrom
☐ *The Cipher* by Kathe Koja
☐ *A Nest of Nightmares* by Lisa Tuttle

Dangerous Games

☐ *Goddess of Filth* by V. Castro
☐ *The Corn Maiden and Other Nightmares* by Joyce Carol Oates
☐ *Jawbone* by Mónica Ojeda; translated by Sarah Booker
☐ *Four by Four* by Sara Mesa; translated by Katie Whittemore
☐ *Cracks* by Sheila Kohler
☐ *The Hanging Game* by Helen Marshall
☐ *The Dead Girls Club* by Damien Anjelica Walters

The Kids Are Not Alright

☐ *The Worst is Yet to Come* by S. P. Miskowski
☐ *It Will Just Be Us* by Jo Kaplan
☐ *Baby Teeth* by Zoje Stage
☐ *The Push* by Ashley Audrain
☐ *An Unthinkable Thing* by Nicole Lundrigan

Sisterhood

☐ *Itzá* by Rios de la Luz
☐ *The Doll Factory* by Elizabeth Macneal
☐ *Sisters* by Daisy Johnson
☐ *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* by Shirley Jackson
☐ *On the Savage Side* by Tiffany McDaniel

☐ *Not A River* by Selva Almada; translated by Annie McDermott
☐ *Forgotten Sisters* by Cynthia Pelayo
☐ *Jack O'Dander* by Priya Sharma

Motherhood in Extremis

☐ *Mother Knows Best: Tales of Homemade Horror* edited by Lindy Ryan
☐ *Deliver Me* by Elle Nash
☐ *Underneath* by Lily Hoang
☐ *Elena Knows* by Claudia Piñeiro; translated by Frances Riddle
☐ *Idle Hands* by Cassondra Windwalker
☐ *Crossroads* by Laurel Hightower

Maternal Instincts

☐ *On the Subject of Blackberries* by Stephanie M. Wytovich
☐ *Chouette* by Claire Oshetsky
☐ *Just Like Mother* by Anne Heltzel
☐ *Delicate Condition* by Danielle Valentine
☐ *And Then She Fell* by Alicia Elliott

Like Mother, Like Daughter

☐ *Doll Crimes* by Karen Runge
☐ *Bound Feet* by Kelsea Yu
☐ *My Darling Girl* by Jennifer McMahon
☐ *A House with Good Bones* by T. Kingfisher
☐ *Where I End* by Sophie White

Behind Closed Doors

☐ *The Grip of It* by Jac Jemc
☐ *Lady Killer* by Joëlle Jones and Jamie S. Rich; illustrated by Joëlle Jones

☐ *The Harpy* by Megan Hunter
☐ *Motherthing* by Ainslie Hogarth
☐ *The Between* by Tananarive Due
☐ *Sign Here* by Claudia Lux
☐ *A Guest in the House* by E.M. Carroll
☐ *I Can Fix Her* by Rae Wilde

Skin Deep: The Ugly Side of Beauty

☐ *Guillotine* by Delilah S. Dawson
☐ *Natural Beauty* by Ling Ling Huang
☐ *Mewing* by Chloe Spencer
☐ *Fashion Trends, Deadly Ends* by Brianna Malotke
☐ *Patrica Wants to Cuddle* by Samantha Allen
☐ *Grotesque* by Natsuo Kirino; translated by Rebecca Copeland

Transformations

☐ *Chlorine* by Jade Song
☐ *Queen of Teeth* by Hailey Piper
☐ *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder
☐ *Mosaic* by Catherine McCarthy
☐ *The Secret Skin* by Wendy N. Wagner

How to Build Your Home Library (Sustainably) and Read More Books

Let me start by saying, I support every bookworm's *rights* and *wrongs*.

Not only do I support you, but I also enable you as well. Whatever you do to cultivate and nurture your bookish lifestyle, I am right there behind you all the way.

That said, I recognize the temptation for us bookworms to buy all the books that interest us can be expensive and time-consuming; not to mention it can be a real challenge to find that much space for so many books. So, let me see if I can highlight a more sustainable and manageable way to build your home library.

Libby App: As the app says, "With Libby, you can enjoy free e-books, digital audiobooks, and magazines from your library. All you need is a library card." I love Libby. I have the app on my phone and use it daily. I check out e-books and audiobooks. Big bonus: You can manage library holds and notifications and send your e-books directly to your Kindle or other e-reader. If you are a fast reader and manage to return your books early, they give you a little emoji bouquet of flowers. It's funny how little rewards like that can motivate me.

Another benefit to using Libby is you can search for books that are not out yet and put a hold on it so that when it comes in, there's a

good chance you will be the first to borrow the library's e-book copy. I did this with *Craft: Stories I Wrote for the Devil* by Ananda Lima in 2024 and got to borrow it on pub day. It was very exciting (highly recommend that book). You can also add books to your wish list so that you can be notified when the library obtains that book.

Drawbacks: Some books have long wait times. Our local libraries don't always have the books we want, so requests will need to be made, and this takes time. Time is not something impulsive bookworms have in abundance. However, I have a hot tip and that is hoopla!

Hoopla: Hoopla is a digital media service bundled in a package for libraries to purchase as a service they can provide to their patrons. Some libraries do not offer it, so it might not be available to you. If your library doesn't have hoopla, you can request it using a form on the hoopla website. You can also just talk to a librarian in-person and ask about it.

My library does provide hoopla. I can access DVDs, audiobooks, CDs, comics, graphic novels, magazines, e-books, and TV shows. You can add the app to your devices (laptop, phone, PC, and smart TV), but you must read your e-books in-app or on those devices—a digital copy cannot be sent to your Kindle (but if you have an iPad, you can read it on that). The magic of hoopla is that they offer a bigger catalog of digital content and there are no wait times. The great thing about reading graphic novels on hoopla when you use your laptop or PC is you can click on a frame to zoom in and read up close. Each frame takes up the whole screen, meaning you can see all the artistic details you would otherwise miss just by reading a physical copy. It's the only way I read graphic novels. If I enjoy them, I buy a physical copy for my library.

Drawbacks: I can only borrow ten digital media items a month. I use my ten every month, even if I don't think I'll be able to read or listen to the content. I'm building a digital library on my hoopla account. There is a time limit of twenty days or so in which to read or listen to what you've borrowed. If time runs out, you can always use up one of your new credits to borrow it again the following month. There are no wait times so you're not being selfish or hoarding books; I know it's tough for us library users to let go of that conscientious mindset.

Edelweiss and NetGalley™: There is this huge misunderstanding floating around out there that casual readers are not allowed to get advance reading copies, or ARCs. This couldn't be further from the truth. If you are a reader who enjoys reading and leaving reviews and can follow a few basic guidelines and terms of agreement, you can sign up for Edelweiss and NetGalley. This is especially great if you're already getting books from publishers and authors and you would like to read more digitally to cut back on the overflow of physical material coming into your space. It is up to individual publishers to approve or decline requests for digital ARCs and then on us, the readers, to review what is being given. Your ability to consistently get approved rests on your commitment to leave consistent reviews. A great symbiotic tool.

Publishers and authors are looking for readers who enjoy sharing the books they are reading with others; readers enjoy getting new books and spreading the joy of finding new favorites with others. Win-Win.

All these digital books are a way for readers to help spread the word about books while simultaneously implementing the golden rule of "try it before you buy it."

I cannot overemphasize enough the satisfaction of reading a book digitally for free, falling in love with it, buying the physical copy, and putting it on my bookshelf in my perfectly curated library of books I love and enjoyed without the stress or anxiety of knowing I'm adding to a hoard of unread books. But this is just one woman's experience; your mileage may vary. No shame in your book buying game. If you love the hoard and buying unread books gives you joy, hoard on, book dragon—it's your cave, your treasure. Amass your wealth as you see fit.

Drawbacks: Using Edelweiss and NetGalley means you are agreeing to their terms of service. These websites were not created to just give readers unlimited access to free books ahead of their publishing dates. There is an understood agreement that the reader will share their unbiased thoughts and opinions about the books they are given. Managing your TBR pile to accommodate for a big influx of digital books to review is part of the expected responsibility when taking advantage of the service these platforms provide.

Acknowledgments

I feel incredibly lucky to be surrounded by friends, family, and industry professionals who have become as close as family in my life who support me in my work. First, my parents, Terry and Dennise Stackhouse, who have provided me with a firm foundation of love throughout my whole life. Anything I have ever been passionate about, my parents have been there to encourage me and brag on me to anyone who will listen. I love that they are both avid readers and movie buffs and get as excited as I do about storytelling.

My husband, Dan, is my best friend and my person in this world. He is in my corner as my biggest supporter, doing everything he can within his power to ensure I have the best possible chance to thrive and grow and take risks while feeling safe and loved. Alongside us are our kids, Ryan, Nat, and Andrew. Each of them has unique ways of showing love and support and, together, form a complete network of faithful and trusted confidantes. Ryan who checks on me throughout the week to make sure I'm caring for myself. Andrew, asking me if I need anything—supplying me with endless tea and helping me with Night Worms deliveries. Nat, with her faithful companionship, watching junky TV and going on walks when I need to move my body and take a break from the laptop. Also, it's such a joy to have her fingerprints all throughout this book with her little illustrations. What an amazing gift.

My sisters, Emily and Sarah, are the first people in my life that I enjoyed making happy through books. I loved reading to them and doing all the voices and watching them experience the joy of books. Even to this day, we love sharing our love of reading with each other and celebrating each other's creative endeavors.

What would this book be, where would I be, what would my writing be without the work of my editor Alexandra Murphy? Every writer needs an editor who truly sees them the way my editor sees me. The way she hears my voice and understands what I'm all about. This book is what it is because of her immaculate enhancement.

Thank you to my agent, Anne Tibbets, at DMLA. It feels so secure to have the best in the business representing me and my work, safeguarding me and standing in my corner to support me in this industry.

I'm grateful to the rest of my Page Street team, Katelynn, Emma, Jamie, and Rosie. I'm pretty sure I have the best publicity team in history to help me navigate the visibility side of publishing. I'm so used to promoting other people's work that I forget to put that same effort and enthusiasm into my own—I appreciate the team's ingenuity and guidance!

What a pleasure it is to have María Amaya's beautiful, dark, Gothic-inspired artwork as part of this project. I'm a firm believer that all books should have pictures, just like when we were kids. I don't think anyone outgrows the desire to have talented artists visualize the concepts and characters we read about and bring them to life on the page. Thank you, María for contributing your talents to this book. The way I gasped when I first saw the cover!

Big love to all the librarians in my life: Becky, Misha, Yaika, Genesee, Corey, and Konrad. Where would most of us even be without the lighthouse-kind-of-love librarians bring to the party? They are beacons of light directing wayward souls to a safe harbor during any kind of storm.

To the bookstagram community of readers, thank you for the endless source of dopamine and serotonin provided while I scroll through beautiful photographs of books, insightful book reviews,

recommendations, discussions, and challenges to read books I never would have discovered on my own.

A hearty thank you to C. S. Humble, my writing advice guru. Nobody that I have ever talked to understands the mechanics of putting the words in my mind into words on paper the way Seth does. I clearly remember a long walk along the Puget Sound with Seth's voice piping through my headphones directly into my head as he gave me critical advice on fine-tuning my introduction. I said, "I'm going to forget everything you're saying when I get home and open up my manuscript."

"No, you won't," he said, "You'll hear my voice, and you'll remember."

And I did. And now it's better because of his help.

Thank you to all the essayists, Christina Henry, Alexis Henderson, Rae Wilde, Alma Katsu, and Laura Purcell, without whom this project would be seriously lacking. I visualized having a choir of women's voices, harmonizing on what it means to be women writing dark and disturbing fiction in their specialized field of harvest. I couldn't have imagined a more powerful song.

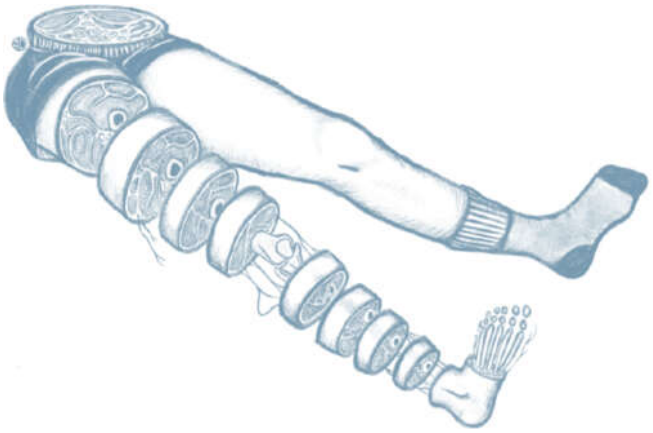
Thank you to my faithful Patreon members! Your support means the world to me. I love our daily conversations around the books we're all reading.

Lastly, a thank you to my business partner and best friend, Ashley, who travels alongside me in this genre and challenges me to read outside my comfort zone all the time. The reading list about femicide in Latin America is dedicated to her and her endless recommendations which I value above all the rest.

"Horror is so alive at this moment. And five minutes from now, it will be stronger than it is right now. Stand in one place and you

can hear it evolving, transforming, shedding its skin over and over and over again. It emerges from its scaled casing a newer creation than it was before with a fire burning in its belly for more growth, more boundaries to cross, more wrongs to right. Horror is relentless in its efforts to reach the hearts of readers and win new souls for the genre."

— 101 Horror Books to Read Before You're Murdered



About the Author

Sadie Hartmann, aka Mother Horror, is the co-owner of the monthly horror fiction subscription company, Night Worms, and the Bram Stoker Awards® winning author of *101 Horror Books to Read Before You're Murdered* from Page Street Publishing. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband of 20+ years where they stare at Mount Rainier, eat street tacos, and hang out with their three kids.

Index

The index that appeared in the print version of this title does not match the pages in your e-book. Please use the search function on your e-reading device to search for terms of interest. For your reference, the terms that appear in the print index are listed below.

A

advance reading copies
(ARCs), sources for
Alaska
Alice in Wonderland vibes
Amazon Original Series Recommendations, list of
animals, slaughtering of
apocalyptic events
Arctic
artwork, distinctive

B

Bad Seed, The (film)
basic survival trope
beauty, ugly side of
Bechdel test
“Birds, The” (Du Maurier)
blackout poetry
Blackwood, Algernon
Blair Witch Project, The (film)
bloodthirsty books. See

vampires
Bluebeard’s wife trope
Brazil

C

Carmilla (Le Fanu)
children, creepy
circle of life trope
classism
coming of age stories
coming of age trope
“cozy” books
cozy vibe
Craft: Stories I Wrote for the
Devil (Lima)
cults–51. See also secret
societies
cursed films, documentaries, and found footage

D

“Damsels and Demons” (Purcell)
dangerous games
dark estates
dead people, seeing of
doctors
documentaries, cursed films, and found footage
Don’t Worry Darling (film)
Dozier School for Boys

Dracula (Stoker), book and character
Du Maurier, Daphne
dual narratives
dual timelines
Due, Tananarive

E

Edelweiss, ARCs and
England
epic sagas. See also family sagas
epistolary narratives
erotica
Event Horizon (film)
Exorcist, The (film)
“extreme” v. splatterpunk, defined

F

fairy tales
    about
    horror and
faith vs. doubt trope
family sagas–91. See also epic sagas
family trope
fantasy. See horror, romance, and fantasy
farms, life on
fate vs. free will trope

femicide, in Latin America
“feral”
    accusations against women and
defined
fifty states, books set in
Flynn, Gillian
folklore, fantasy, and fairy
tales
food
found footage, documentaries, and cursed films
Frankenstein (Shelley)
Frankenstein echos

G

games, dangerous
Ghost Sequences, The (Wise)
Gone Girl (Flynn)
good vs. evil trope
Gothic families, foreign
Gothic horror trope
governesses. See nannies/governesses/teachers
graphic novels

H

Harlem Renaissance
haunted houses
Henderson, Alexis, “On
Feminist Fiction,”

Henry, Christina
    “The Horror Is So Close,”
list of books by
historical erasure
“History and Horror” (Katsu)
Hoopla media service
horror, defined
“Horror Is So Close, The”
(Henry)
horror, romance, and fantasy
hubris trope
humankind vs. self trope
humankind vs. society trope
humor
“hysterical”
    accusations against women and
    defined

I

Iceland
identity trope
indie books
Irving, Washington

J

“Just Like Other Girls” (Wilde)

K

Katsu, Alma, “History and Horror,” 136
Kentucky
Kindle Unlimited books
Kissing Booth Girl and Other Stories (Wise)

L

Latin American, femicide in
Le Fanu, Sheridan
Legend of Sleepy Hollow, The (Irving)
letters. See epistolary narratives
Levin, Ira
Lewis, C. S.
Libby app
libraries, as sources for books
Lima, Ananda
Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe (Lewis) vibes
living nightmares
loneliness trope

M

madness, houses and
madness trope
Magician’s Nephew, The (Lewis)
“Make Horror Queer as

Fuck” (Piper)
Mandela effect
mankind vs. nature trope
marginalized persons
marriage
medieval era
mermaids
Mexico
middle grade horror book list
missing persons
mood, defined
motherhood
murder mysteries–75

N

nannies/governess/teachers
NetGalley, ARCs and
“not quite fiction” vibe
NoveList Plus

O

occult themes
“On Feminist Fiction” (Henderson)

P

paranormal plots and settings
Piper, Hailey, “Make Horror
Queer as Fuck,” 28

poetic justice trope
power & corruption trope
psychic trauma
Purcell, Laura, “Damsels and Demons,” 76
pursuit of love trope

R

racism
reading, generally
    advice for readers
    how to use this book
    library sources for books
    triggers and tropes
    “vibes reading
reading lists
    Amazon Original Series Recommendations
    checklist for horror books
    Gothic and macabre books
    Kindle Unlimited books
    middle grade books
    short story collections
    young adult books
Reformatory, The (Due)
revenge stories

revenge trope
romance
horrormance
horrormantasy

S

Scotland
secret societies–55. See
also cults
self-published books. See
indie books
series
Amazon Original
Gothic and macabre themed
Kindle Unlimited books
Shelley, Mary
short stories
list of collections
Simmons, Dan
sisters
slavery and enslavement
Slewfoot (Brom)
Sourdough Universe
splatterpunk
states, books set in 50 states
Stepford Wives, The (Levin)
strangers
survival stories

survival trope
swampcore and sporror
Sweden
Switzerland

T

teachers. See nannies/governesses/teachers
Terror, The (Simmons)
time travel
transformations
tropes, listed

U

unreliable narrator

V

vampires
“vibes reading,” 11
Vietnam
vintage horror

W

war trope
werewolf story
Westerns
Wilde, Rae, “Just Like Other Girls,” 184
“Willows, The” (Blackwood)

Wise, A. C.
witches and witchcraft
woods and forests

Y

Yu, Kelsea, curated list of
young adult books

Z

zombies

Thank you for buying this
Page Street Publishing Co. ebook.

To receive special offers, bonus content,
and info on new releases and other great reads,
sign up for our newsletters.

Or visit us online at
www.pagestreetpublishing.com

Table of Contents

Title Page

Copyright Notice

Dedication

Foreword

Introduction

What is Vibes Reading?

How to Use This Book

Twisted Haunted Houses

I See Dead People

Bloodthirsty

Unhappily Ever After: Dark Folklore, Fantasy, and Fairy Tales

Don't Go in the Woods

"The Horror is So Close" by Christina Henry

Documentaries, Cursed Films, and Found Footage

Women vs. The Cult

Gothic Secret Societies

An Escape to a Beautiful Estate with Unexpected Darkness

Gótico Familia

The Tropiest Gothic Horror Trope Ever

If These Walls Could Talk

"Damsels and Demons" by Laura Purcell
Horrormance
Horromantasy
Cottage Spells & Family Sagas
50 States, 50 Books by Women
Women of Splatterpunk
What Women Say About Femicide in Latin America Through Horror Fiction
"On Feminist Fiction" by Alexis Henderson
Eat Your Vegetables
On the Farm
Swampcore & Sporror
Not Your Dad's Westerns
Exposing Historical Erasure
"History and Horror" by Alma Katsu
Psychic Trauma
Survive Your Living Nightmares
Save Yourself from Hell
Echoes of Frankenstein
Ladies of October: Vintage Horror
Dangerous Games
The Kids Are Not Alright
Sisterhood
Motherhood in Extremis
Maternal Instincts
Like Mother, Like Daughter
Behind Closed Doors

"Just Like Other Girls" by Rae Wilde
Skin Deep: The Ugly Side of Beauty Transformations

Book Checklist
How to Build Your Home Library (Sustainably) and Read More Books
Acknowledgments
About the Author
Index

Copyright © 2025 Sadie Hartmann

First published in 2025 by

Page Street Publishing Co.

27 Congress Street, Suite 1511

Salem, MA 01970

www.pagestreetpublishing.com

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used, in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN: 9798890032973

The publisher of this book does not authorize the use or reproduction of any part of this book in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. The publisher of this book expressly reserves this book from the Text and Data Mining exception in accordance with Article 4(3) of the European Union Digital Single Market Directive 2019/790.

Our eBooks may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at 1-800-221-7945, extension. 5442, or by e-mail at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2024945325

Edited by Alexandra Murphy

Cover and book design by Rosie Stewart for Page Street Publishing Co.

Illustrations by María Amaya

Art here, here, here, here, here, and 208 by Nat Hartmann